Partial Faiths

JOHN A. McCLURE

Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison

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John A. McClure

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For Mary

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PREFACE

Partial Faiths has three main goals: to survey the contemporary popular and philosophical movement that is sometimes called postsecularism; to show that a surprising number of eminent contemporary novelists are engaged in this movement; and to offer, by so doing, a new way of configuring the terrain of contemporary fiction. Postsecularism, a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity, is being studied and theorized in North America by thinkers such as Harold Bloom, William Connolly, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor. In Europe the project of inventing and understanding postsecularism is identified with philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Hadot, and Gianni Vattimo. But novelists such as Don DeLillo, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Thomas Pynchon, and Leslie Marmon Silko are also vigorously exploring postsecularism and postsecularist modes of being. These novelists, whom critics often relegate to separate domains within contemporary fiction, are all thinking in the narrative mode about postsecular movements and possibilities that the theorists and sociologists treat more abstractly. All of them tell stories about new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being. And in each case, the forms of faith they invent, study, and affirm are dramatically partial and open-ended. They do not provide, or even aspire to provide, any full "mapping" of the reenchanted cosmos. They do not promise anything like full redemption. And they are partial in another sense as well in that they are selectively dedicated to progressive ideals of social transformation and well-being. In all these respects, of course, postsecularism is at odds with resurgent fundamentalisms.

Rutgers University has been a splendid place to study postsecularism. From the first, as I turned my attention to the religious dimensions of contemporary literature and culture, I was patiently challenged and supported

by my secular-minded colleagues and friends, Aijaz Ahmad, James Livingston, and Bruce Robbins. And I was immeasurably assisted by several other colleagues—George Kearns, Cleo McNelly Kearns, Alicia Ostriker, and Kurt Spellmeyer—who were thinking and writing about religious issues. In a time when religion was not a common topic of discussion in contemporary literary studies, we drew regularly on one another's knowledge and enthusiasm. And we drew as well on the intelligence and energy of our students. I am particularly grateful, in this respect, to students with whom I worked on senior honors theses and dissertations, among them, Jared Beloff, Jennifer Sonntag, Karin Gosselink, Anthony Lioi, Erick Sierra, and Channette Romero. But I am indebted as well to all the students who taught me in my graduate seminars on postsecularism.

I am grateful, also, to the broader communities of discussion convened by two Rutgers research centers, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis and the Center for Cultural Studies. Phyllis Mack's year-long seminar on religion and modernity at RCHA brought scholars together from around the university and the country, and Michael Warner's seminar on secularism at the CCS enabled Rutgers faculty and graduate students from diverse disciplines to work with each other and with invited guests such as William Connolly, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Taylor. I owe a second debt of gratitude to Phyllis Mack, who subsequently invited me to participate in an extraordinary conference on religion and modernity at the Rockefeller Foundation's center in Bellagio, Italy.

The community of Muhlenberg College, where my wife, Mary Lawlor, heads the American Studies program, has also been a rich source of support and edification. Through the college's "Living Writers" program, I got to spend some brief but invaluable time with Gary Snyder and Michael Ondaatje. And my friendships with Muhlenberg faculty and their families have been rich and stimulating. Set designer Tim Averill, painter Pat Badt, sculptor Scott Sherk, and New Testament scholar and writer Virginia Wiles helped me to think with greater clarity about the intersection of art and religion and the thought worlds of popular religious movements. And Mary, who writes about Native American public culture, has helped me begin to appreciate the complexity of Native American spirituality and trace its impact on non-Native cultures. In their exuberant staging of Passover seders, silent mountaintop retreats, raucous solstice celebrations, and back-

yard weddings, my Muhlenberg friends regularly expose me to the practices of religious innovation constitutive of postsecular fiction.

This project has been nurtured as well by contacts made beyond the academy. My grandfather, Alexander Morton, showed me that a teetotaling Baptist deacon could also be a spirited fiddler and a union activist (in the lace mills). And a host of teachers and friends have provided further confirmation of the compatibility of spirituality, art, and progressive political action. Among these I would single out Joanna Macy, the Buddhist practitioner, peace activist, and author; John Stam, a Christian missionary, biblical scholar, and Central America activist; Patricia Morales Poole, a Wiccan healer and AIDS activist in South Africa; and Fred Pfeil, my friend of thirty-five years, who was able to combine, in his short but splendid life, the roles of academic, cultural theorist, novelist, Buddhist practitioner, peace activist, and prison worker. These individuals, with their unorthodox beliefs and their bottomless social energies, have been for me the living faces of the communities represented in postsecular fiction. I thank them all.

Finally, my thanks to the readers who helped me shape this study. At Rutgers, Marianne DeKoven, colleague and friend, read the entire manuscript and offered me invaluable editing advice. At Georgia, Nancy Grayson, M. J. Devaney, and Courtney Denney made the task of preparing the manuscript for publication pleasurable and edifying. And Mary Lawlor, by innumerable acts of constructive criticism, made the lonely work of composition less lonely and kept alive my (partial) faith in this project.

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Introduction
Postsecular Projects

In Tony Kushner's celebrated play *Angels in America* (1993), a secular-minded gay man, Prior Walters, is converted by catastrophe to a powerful, dramatically unorthodox spirituality. When the play opens, Prior has just discovered that his body, destined in his imagination to become, through liberation, a "fabulous" and reliable source of gratification, has betrayed him: he has AIDS. Almost immediately, his partner, Louis, betrays him, too, leaving him to deal with his pain, his terror, his physical disgust, and his heartbreak. Prior is at this point a thoroughly secular being, a "soul without faith who does not seek" (Merton 107). Even after he discovers that he is ill, he does not embark on a deliberate quest for supernatural support. Instead, the supernatural literally breaks in on him. He begins to have extraordinary experiences he cannot explain. He finds himself in another character's dreams, receives a series of astonishing visits from

ancestors and angels, is tutored on the decorum of divine-human relations by a Mormon friend, and eventually wrestles successfully with an angel for what he most desires, "more life" (2.135). When we last see him, gathered with his friends under the statue of another angel at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, he is feeling better, studying the Bible, and pursuing his commitments to gay liberation. Yet his understanding of the extraordinary experiences that have overtaken him remains ambiguous, unsettled. Have his visions been hallucinatory products of disease and drugs, or has he actually been in touch with beings of a different, supernatural order? Has his disease been arrested by biblical angels like the one commemorated at the Bethesda Fountain, or by the scientists at Bethesda, Maryland, where the drugs that help to heal him are distributed, or by the ministrations of his multicultural community of friends? Or have all these forces cooperated to grant him the "blessing" he requests, "more life"?

Kushner makes it clear in his stage instructions that he wants to leave these questions hanging, to open us to the possibility that the world is shot through with mysterious agents and energies without insisting on this or endorsing any particular supernatural system. Thus, while the extraordinary beings and realms Prior encounters resemble those of biblical Judaism and kabbalistic mysticism, his experiences violate secular definitions of the real in other ways as well, and even the biblically grounded components of the extraordinary are unconventionally described. In some of their appearances the play's angels are supremely erotic; in others they resemble celestial bureaucrats. Heaven, in this universe, is not as pleasant as San Francisco. And while a visit there may win the visitor "more life," it does not guarantee anything like life eternal. Prior is better, but he is not cured: "I have been living with AIDS for five years," he tells us, in the final scene of the play (2.146).

The play's affirmation of the religious is qualified in another way as well. The angel who appears to Prior is a font of vital energy; it even quotes Walt Whitman. But it is also a "cosmic reactionary" (2.55) who uses the AIDS epidemic as a pretext to demand that people "Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow . . . HOBBLE YOURSELVES!" (2.52). Prior refuses to serve as the prophet for this reactionary social program. Instead, tutored by a Mormon friend and by his own worldly desires, he "wrestles" with the angels not only for "more life" but also for "progress, migration, motion . . . modernity" (2.132). And perhaps because these modalities, too, are

valorized in the biblical tradition, in the end his petition is granted. The religious reappears in *Angels in America*, then, not as monolithic truth but as a complex field of enigmatic apparitions, assertions, and counterassertions. Its energies and its claims, Kushner insists, can be linked either to a reactionary politics or to a reconstituted progressive politics more alert than has traditionally been the case to cultural repression and the limits of human knowledge.

In its representation of a secular-minded character's partial and painful conversion toward the religious, its dramatic disruptions of secular structures of reality, its repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being, and its insistence on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects, *Angels in America* models the structures and themes of a surprising number of contemporary literary narratives. Similar plots and projects shape important work in virtually every domain of contemporary fiction: the postmodern novels of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo; the work of African Americans Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara; the postcolonial novels of Bessie Head, Michael Ondaatje, and Salman Rushdie; and novels by Native American authors N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and Louise Erdrich. This body of fiction can be called "postsecular," for several reasons: because the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically "weakened" religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects.

Of course, not all postsecular styles and themes are unique to contemporary literature, and not all postsecular texts are alike. Postsecularism itself has been a feature of literary thinking since the romantics. A full study of the tendency would reach back, in American fiction alone, into the work of the transcendentalists and the modernists. And while postsecular texts do share certain features, they are stylistically and thematically diverse. In certain texts, for instance, the turn to the religious is little more than a cautious probing, and the process of ontological opening is extremely subtle: a quiet loosening of the fabric of "the real" and momentary, almost indiscernible, interruptions of the "laws of nature." DeLillo's *White Noise* and Ondaatje's *The English Patient* exemplify this sort of postsecular narrative. But in other cases, such as Pynchon's *Vineland* or Morrison's *Paradise*, conversions and

ontological openings alike are dramatic: people are born again, the dead are brought back to life, gods walk the Earth, and windows open in the walls of the secular world. Finally, the substantial affirmations of the extraordinary developed in different works are drawn, as we shall see, from a whole range of religious discourses and produce new, weakened and hybridized, idioms of belief.

Yet, certain features are constant across the field of postsecular texts. The partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional protagonist passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling. And yet the postsecular characters deposited in these zones do not seem particularly uncomfortable there nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice. In a similar manner, the break with secular versions of the real does not lead in postsecular narrative to the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos, as it often does in conventional narratives of conversion. Gods appear, but not God. Other realms become visible but either partially and fleetingly or in bizarre superabundance. Miracles and visitations suggest that the laws of nature may be contingent but without providing any clearly coded alternatives. And once again, this situation is represented with a certain equanimity. One does not sense, in spite of the dramatic instability of the worlds thus defined, that either the novelists or their characters are anxious to "straighten things out." "I'm sort of comfortable with the discomfort of being an agnostic," Tony Kushner proclaims in a recent interview (Wuthnow, *Creative* 149).

These qualities of incompleteness and instability also shape postsecular representations of spiritual community. As in traditional narratives, conversion is in part a matter of coming into community. But the communities founded or discovered by postsecular pilgrims are dramatically small, fragile, and transitory—the very opposite of the dogmatic faith communities and vast megachurches that are now a troubling feature of the American landscape. In *Angels in America*, Prior's informal congregation meets in the open air, under the statue of the angel at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. And in contemporary postsecular fiction, similarly ragtag congrega-

tions gather on highway overpasses or in abandoned churches and nunneries or woodland clearings—places identified with the religious but at a distance from its more articulated and institutionalized domains.

A similar distrust of permanent structures and fixed locations governs the postsecular treatment of scripture. Sacred discourses figure everywhere in postsecular novels. They shape the patterning and interpretation of characters' experiences, surface in their thoughts and words, and provide terms to describe and evaluate the worlds in which they dwell. But at the same time, it is rare that any single discourse is treated as a complete and authoritative representation of the real. Instead, scriptural traditions tend either to be selectively cited, interrogated, and affirmed or to be brought into vertiginous relation with one another, so that larger claims for any one tradition's universal reach, absolute accuracy, and authority are denied. Thomas Pynchon sums up the postsecular attitude toward received tradition in an episode in *Gravity's Rainbow*. A Jamaican countertenor, brought to wartime England by "the intricate needs of the Anglo-American Empire" (129), is singing in an Anglican chapel. His Latin and German songs carry the languages of the Axis powers into the heart of England, and his own voice resonates with a Caribbean sensuality alien to the "nervous Protestants" in the congregation (129). Pynchon's narrator, delighted by this denationalizing and adulterating of a national religion, invites us (and the soldiers straggling by) to "come in" and "[l]isten to this mock-angel singing, let your communion be at least in listening, even if [his words] are not spokesmen for your exact hopes, your exact, darkest terror, listen" (134–35). He invites the reader to participate, in other words, in the opening up of spiritual possibilities effected by the Jamaican singer, to listen to his religiously saturated songs and imagine a form of communion no longer dependent on absolute conviction and doctrinal conformity. Then, in a final move, he extends the circle of inclusion even further. "There must have been evensong here long before the news of Christ," he muses, and the suggestion builds a bridge of continuity between pagan and Christian modes of worship (135).

The narrator goes on to justify this radically nondogmatic and ecumenical opening. We sing the sacred, he explains, in order "to raise the possibility" of a moment that might "banish the Adversary [and] destroy the boundaries between our lands, our bodies, our stories, all false, about who we are" (135). For Pynchon's narrator, then, the great religious stories are simultaneously the vessels of important intimations and "all false," all

mere approximations that become, when they are too fully elaborated or too emphatically endorsed, mortally dangerous. There can be no question, for a person so inclined, of any affirmation of orthodoxy, let alone of the dogmatic stringencies of fundamentalism. But there can be no question, either, of a wholesale abandonment of any discourse that gestures toward the most profound dreams, promises, and possibilities.

In the end, then, postsecular narratives affirm the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as they reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of full return to an authoritative faith. The paths they chart do not, for the most part, lead back into the domain of conventional religious dwelling, where life unfolds under a sacred canopy of ontological givens, moral codes, and organized community (Wuthnow, *After* 1–18). Instead, they lead into zones where characters must learn to reconcile important secular and religious intuitions and where they receive "limited gift[s]" of the spirit (Ondaatje, *English* 300). These characters are transformed and steadied, as it were, by the sense that the world is seamed with mystery and benignity, by awakened impulses to reverence, wonder, self-forgetfulness, and care, and by coming into company with others. These gifts make life more bearable, but they fall short of the gifts of absolute conviction and secure dwelling identified with traditional experiences of conversion or revival. For those who receive them are still compelled to navigate without any reliable map of the cosmos or of history, any full diagram of divine power or comprehensive census of supernatural beings, any formally elaborated moral code or clearly marked path toward salvation.

This insistence on stubborn spiritual obscurity—and the challenges it poses—sets postsecular fiction apart both from contemporary fundamentalist fiction and from the countless products of New Age spirituality that represent this historical moment as one of triumphant religious resurgence or return. For in these works—I'm thinking of best-selling novels such as the wildly popular *Left Behind* series by fundamentalist novelists Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and James Redfield's New Age adventure novel *The Celestine Prophecy*—the enchanted world waiting just beyond the boundaries of secularism offers answers to all problems, and the only challenge is to get there, learn its laws, and submit to them. In the works at hand, on the contrary, characters may be delivered from secular styles of being that have become unendurable to postsecular, religiously inflected styles that help sustain them, but these alternatives still possess their own stubborn

difficulties and darknesses. Thus, while it may be accurate to speak of the project of these texts as one of reenchantment, this process also must be seen as fraught with risk and uncertainty and these texts as emphasizing not only the false promises of secularism and religious fundamentalism but also the profound difficulties of any life, including that lived within the mysterious precincts of the spirit.

The broader claims and purposes of this study are that a body of contemporary North American fiction contributes vigorously to the more general cultural debate over the place of the religious in postmodern life and society and that it does so in ways that distinguish it sharply both from defenses of philosophical secularism and from the most salient forms of religious revival. My goal is to begin clarifying some of this fiction's most characteristic strategies and claims: its plots of partial conversion, its project of ontological disruption, its efforts at once to reassert and to weaken religious conceptions of reality, and its attempts to imagine a new, religiously inflected, form of progressive politics.

A Postsecular Culture

Before turning to the fiction itself, I want to sketch out a map of the broader postsecular movements with which it is engaged. These movements—including the explosive growth of fundamentalist and pneumatic forms of organized religious practice, "New Age" experiments in alternative spiritualities, and the turn toward religion in certain philosophical circles—all reflect a strong but selective disenchantment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives. The novelists whose work I explore share this disenchantment and determination: they seek at once to evaluate the culturally dominant modes of postsecular innovation and to develop their own religiously inflected alternatives to secularism. With what specific practical and theoretical projects, then, are contemporary postsecular novelists in conversation?

By now the worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism is painfully evident to everyone, even as fundamentalism itself is a disputed term. Some scholars would narrow its use to the historical movement within Protestant Christianity that sought a return to what it "held to be the 'fundamentals' of Christianity" (Jurgensmeyer 5). But others suggest that

some of the key characteristics of this movement are shared with other religious movements, all of which can be properly designated "fundamentalist." Gabriel Almond and his coauthors take this approach in *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*. Fundamentalisms, they argue, seek to transform "sacred texts[,] . . . epics and poems[,] and other open-ended genres" into "the stuff of 'fundamental,' 'inerrant' Scriptures" (16) and to render the entire community subject to their divinely ordained and incontestable "doctrines and codes" (20). In order to protect the "purity" of the community, its "uniformity of belief and practice" (17), they establish sharply exclusive boundaries around the community. And in order to maintain the entire system, they establish an elite of leaders who are deemed to be "unassailable in their authority over contemporary belief and praxis" (18).

But fundamentalism is, of course, not the only form of religious resurgence to emerge over the past thirty or forty years. As Wade Roof, Robert Wuthnow, Robert Bellah, and other sociologists of religion have shown, the last several decades have also been marked by the growth of a different sort of religious sensibility among members of the best educated and most thoroughly secularized sectors of the American public. Roof describes privileged American baby boomers as a "generation of seekers" who have sought to satisfy a restless spirituality not only "in evangelical and fundamentalist teachings" but also "in Eastern religions[,] . . . in mysticism and New Age movements, in Goddess worship and other ancient religious rituals" (4). These seekers, Roof shows, often bring habits of critical thinking and progressive political ideas to their religious explorations and innovations. In *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, Robert Wuthnow draws a similar picture of a religiously animated culture divided in its inclinations between increasingly fundamentalist forms of religious "dwelling"—unquestioning commitment to a particular faith (49)—and more exploratory styles of religious life—"seeking" and "practice." While some Americans struggle to shore up (or invent) traditional religious structures, Wuthnow claims, many others "have been losing faith in a [traditional religious] metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe" (3). Religiously unhoused but spiritually hungry, such people "increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom" (3). As we shall see, religious experience returns, in many contemporary novels, as just this sort of fragmentary, plural, and only partially illuminating phenomenon.

The philosopher Charles Taylor draws a similar picture of contemporary American religious ferment in *Varieties of Religion Today*. An "essential feature of our divided age," he writes, is that many secular-minded persons find themselves drawn back toward the religious by inchoate inner promptings—"beginning intimations and intuitions that [they] feel bound to follow up" (116). These promptings can take the form of a "profound desire that has been ignored," Taylor writes, or of an encounter with "some greater reality . . . [that] has been closed off" by secularism; "most people feel both pulls" (56–57). Taylor reminds us here that many of Roof's and Wuthnow's seekers are religious beginners, products of a culture in which many people remain almost completely unschooled in religious beliefs and practices. Religiously illiterate, they are drawn by vagrant promptings into the obscure countries of the spirit, where they find themselves, as Kushner's Prior does, without even those rudimentary maps that have helped mark the way for earlier, better schooled, predecessors.

But religiously untutored seekers are not the only contemporary Americans caught up in a postsecular renegotiation of the religious. In *The Strong Light of the Canonical*, Harold Bloom identifies another form of secular/religious hybridity. In spite of their secular educations, Bloom observes, many of his university students remain "Jewish in one way or another: confusedly, ambivalently, ambiguously, and partly." Their culture, he continues, "is now an amalgam of imaginative literature, psychoanalysis, and a kind of Kabbalah." "That is the way things are," Bloom concludes, and that is "the way they are going to be. What offers itself as normative Judaism does not speak to them" (77). Bloom's partly Jewish, partly secular students can stand, here, for the generations of Americans who have been instructed in, and remained ambivalently committed to, both religious and secular modes of seeing and being. Their struggle to accommodate both modes and to fashion something new in the place of their convergence has been a feature of American cultural life, both within organized religious communities and in unchurched settings, for more than a century and a half. It is itself a postsecular struggle—if not in the strong sense of a movement that breaks selectively but dramatically with a dominant secularism, then in the sense of one that both selectively assimilates and refuses to fully endorse secular ideas.

Much contemporary literature is a product of this sort of postsecularism as well. If Kushner's Prior is a "beginner" in Taylor's sense, a religiously untutored, secular-minded individual drawn back toward the sacred by

promptings he does not invite but cannot ignore, Kushner himself resembles Bloom's "partly" religious students, and *Angels in America* is his partly religious credo. Thus in the afterword to the play, Kushner describes himself as inspired by both a "complicated, powerful religious [tradition]" and a "deep ambivalence" toward that tradition. And he acknowledges his indebtedness not only to Harold Bloom himself, for his definition of blessing, but also to Walter Benjamin, for his blending of "the 'scientific' disciplines of Marx and Freud" with "a Kabbalist-inflected mysticism and a dark, apocalyptic, spirituality" (2.154).

Both Prior and his creator, then, are struggling to think the world in terms of a turbulent mixture of secular and religious categories. And if Wuthnow, Taylor, and Bloom are right, they are not alone: a diverse population of contemporary Americans inhabits the border zone between the secular and the religious, and like other border populations, this one is producing new, complexly hybridized forms of thought and life. Whatever their other identifications, contemporary postsecular novelists emerge from this population and address its concerns in their work.

The Logic of Partial Belief

It is one thing to identify emergent postsecular communities; it is another to understand why the impulse to reopen relations with the religious is so strong in our times. Several contemporary philosophical thinkers have made an effort to explain "the pervasive return of religion in contemporary culture" (Vattimo, *Belief* 10). The arguments adduced in their work vary, but several resonate powerfully with the analyses developed in postsecular fiction. Religion returns, they remind us, as it always has, when worldly life becomes intolerable. And it returns with a specific, historically supercharged force, as secular modernity's promises of peace, prosperity, and progress fail to materialize and as reason itself begins to undermine secular rationalism's claims to exclusive authority on matters of truth.

In *Belief*, his study of (and contribution to) contemporary religious resurgence, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo begins his analysis autobiographically, by acknowledging that his own turn toward the Christianity of his youth was sponsored in part by personal crises. He is "not ashamed to say" that his resurgent interest in the religious was "related to the ex-

perience of death—of people dear to me, with whom I had planned to share a longer stretch of the journey" (22). And it was the product as well, he writes, of local political disappointments, in the course of which secular "projects, dreams of renewal, hopes even for (political) redemption . . . were shattered in a wholly contingent way" (24). Vattimo's frankness here casts light on a major feature of postsecular narratives of turning, for in virtually all of these narratives the event of turning is set in motion by personal catastrophe, experiences that shatter characters' habitual modes of seeing and being. Mortal illness, the horrors of war, extreme experiences of displacement are represented in these novels as painfully enabling sources of self transformation. But once again, this dynamic is represented as partial and mysterious. Not all who suffer are awakened to the extraordinary and to a care for others; not all who experience acute vulnerability respond by opening their hearts to the world.

In addition to these experiences of bereavement and disappointment, Vattimo relates his turning to the two broad socio-intellectual developments mentioned above, the historical weakening of confidence in secular-rational promises of peace and progress and the philosophical weakening of secular reason's claims to exclusive authority on matters of the real. For many, he suggests, the events of the twentieth century—the social horrors that occurred and the comprehensive improvements that did not—severely undermined the great modern master narratives of secular enlightenment and emancipation. And at the same time, developments within philosophy undermined secular rationalism's claim to exclusive and absolute authority. Reason's grand work of demythification, Vattimo writes, "finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth" (29). As a consequence, "Reason faces many problems that have deepened in recent years"—problems of ecological collapse and social violence—with an unprecedented "sense of defeat" (26). In the partial vacuum produced by these developments, the counterpromptings and propositions of the religious again became audible and attractive. Thus, he writes, "whereas for many decades in this century, religions appeared, according to the Enlightenment and positivistic idea, as 'residual' forms of experience destined to be deleted by the imposition of the modern form of life (techno-scientific rationalization of social life, political democracy, and so on) today they appear again as possible guides for the future" (28).

Yet Vattimo is well aware that religion's record as a reliable guide to more humane forms of collective being has been uneven, to say the least. If the religious beckons so powerfully in our times, he asks, how is it to be rendered free of the features that make for dogmatism and violence? This question, central to postsecular fiction, was raised some thirty-five years ago by Mircea Eliade, the vastly influential, and controversial, historian of religion. Addressing the question of religion's future, Belden Lane writes, Eliade called for a " 'demystification in reverse,' " one that would affirm "the mystery of divine presence today . . . without returning to a pre-critical naivete with its 'enchanted enclosure of consciousness' " (19). In so doing, Eliade identified the two challenges that shape postsecular thinking in contemporary fiction. The first is to fashion compelling spiritually inflected alternatives to the most relentlessly secular modes of seeing and being, and the second is to ensure that these alternatives will leave room for reflection, disagreement, difference, and innovation.

I am not qualified to trace the rich and varied response to this challenge in contemporary theology. Nor am I convinced that such a survey would be as helpful in illuminating the designs of postsecular fiction as a brief survey of the philosophical reflection of thinkers such as Vattimo, Rorty, Connolly, and Derrida. For it is in their work that we find secular thought reopening negotiations with the religious. And it is here that we find a postsecular alternative taking shape in the space between traditional secular and religious discourses.

One of the most useful descriptions of a postsecular project of responsible return is that offered by Vattimo and Richard Rorty in *The Future of Religion*. Vattimo, famous for his celebration of "weak thought," here attempts to imagine what he calls "weak religion." While fundamentalism celebrates an all-powerful God whose absolute law is dictated to humans through infallible spokespersons, scriptures, and institutions, weak religion, guided by insights drawn from hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and pragmatism, avoids absolute assertions and totalizing schemes and checks institutional religion's impulse "to participate in power and in grandeur" (56). The weakened Catholicism Vattimo affirms draws back from the idea of an infinite, all-powerful deity, refuses to provide comprehensive descriptions of the real and the good, and distances itself from "the visible, dis-

ciplinary, and dogmatic structure of the Church" (69). Its relation to the traditional idea of redemption is equally unorthodox. Setting aside ideas of transcendence, eternal life, and absolute truth, weak religion "summons humans back" (9) to their historicity, their finitude, and their fallibility. And it makes a conversion to charity (rather than an anticipation of judgment and eternal life) the core of its message.

By offering this sketch of a deliberately "weakened" religiosity, Vattimo and Rorty address Eliade's challenge and help us recognize the tricky task of postsecular fiction, which aims at once to reaffirm and to weaken the religious, to represent it as a resource for personal and collective empowerment that must itself be weakened in order to be responsibly deployed. Such an attempt to delink the religious from projects of power and grandeur is evident in *Angels in America*, where traditional figures of divine power are both celebrated and mocked, and the alliance of Mormonism, Christian fundamentalism, and the Reagan administration is deplored. And it is staged in the play's unfolding action, which conducts us from three bastions of the law—the formal Jewish funeral service with which the play opens, the temples of the secular law where Joe and Louis work, and Heaven itself—to the unbounded, open-air space of Central Park, where an informal congregation pursues political and religious knowledge with the help of an unordained teacher, Prior.

The notion of deliberate weakening also helps us appreciate the play's refusal to make the larger promises identified with popular religious rhetoric: promises of "health and wealth," happiness, understanding, or eternal life. None of the conventional equations of belief with power, certainty, and infinite satisfaction are honored in *Angels in America*, yet the text suggests that the religious still makes a difference without them. This double practice of disavowal and reaffirmation is repeated again and again in the novels we will study. In some of them, the work of weakening goes on within an established tradition, rendering it more inclusive; in many others, however, the religious reemerges in a space, social and discursive, beyond or between traditions, and this positioning of the spiritual is in itself a major mode of weakening.

Jacques Derrida, who collaborated with Vattimo, identifies, in *The Gift of Death*, another contemporary strategy of productive weakening. In discussing the work of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, Derrida comments that this work resembles the "many discourses that seek in our day to

be religious—discourses of a philosophical type if not philosophies themselves—without putting forth theses or *theologems* that would by their very structure teach something corresponding to the dogmas of a given religion" (49, emphasis in the original). Patočka, for instance, develops "Christian themes" in his work, yet the logic of his argument "has no need *of the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event*. It needs to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself" (49, emphasis in the original). Derrida cites Levinas, Marion, and Ricoeur as contemporary figures who belong to "this tradition that consists of proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma . . . a *thinking* that 'repeats' the possibility of religion without religion" or "without reference to religion as institutional dogma" (49, emphasis in the original). This "strategy of perhaps" is characteristic of postsecular literary rhetoric. *Angels in America*, which refuses ever to resolve the relentlessly thematized question of the status (hallucination or visitation?) of its many extraordinary events, is typical in this regard.

In a trenchant essay entitled "A Letter to Augustine," William Connolly offers a third description of weakened religiosity. He claims that a "*post-theist, postsecular*" way of seeing and being is emerging on the frontier between sacred and secular systems of belief (*Identity/Difference* 155, emphasis in the original). This complex of ideas is vigorously spiritual but emphatically at odds with the "coercive theology" (133) of traditional, institutional monotheism. Non- or polytheistic, it confirms Nietzsche's intuition that the "*religious instinct is growing powerfully but is rejecting theistic gratification in deep distrust*" and his insistence that for many modern people, " 'the father' in god is thoroughly refuted, likewise the 'judge' and the 'rewarder' " (157, emphasis in the original). Connolly's postsecularism resembles Vattimo's weak religion not only in its rejection of sovereign divinities and discourses but in other ways as well. So, for instance, it refuses to make " 'eternal life . . . the essential aim of religion' " (125), advocating in its place a "reverence for life and the earth" (155) and a reconciling of oneself to mortality. This earthliness challenges not only reigning sacred traditions but reigning secular attitudes as well: it is equally at odds with otherworldly and apocalyptic strands of Christianity and with the instrumentalist or Earth-oblivious ideologies of capitalist and socialist states in the industrial world. We see this tendency at work in *Angels in America* and in many other contemporary narratives that refuse not just Heaven but all secular stations of exalted power. In these works, the path of re-

demption leads down not only from the false heights of material privilege, amoral play, or ideological rapture but also from imagined spiritual transcendence. These are narratives, then, of worldly and mortal redemption, in a world powerfully but only partially restored by the rediscovery of its spiritual dimensions.

By setting the religious, the secular, and the postsecular representations of the real side by side in a manner that suggests both a timeline and a debate, "A Letter to Augustine" illuminates the basic discursive structure of postsecular literature. Connolly sums up the three positions as follows:

> *The Augustinian moment*: we are fragile; god is perfect; the earth is solid and bountiful; we have been given dominion over it.
> *The secular reply*: we are powerful; the old god is good only for marriages and funerals; nature is pliable and bountiful; we will attain mastery over it.
> *The posttheist, postsecular rejoinder*: the earth is fragile; highly organized human economies are interwoven with its fragility; the *sovereign* god was on balance a destructive construction; the hegemony of the modern project of mastery results in the globalization of contingency; nontheistic reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated. (155, emphasis in the original)

Connolly illuminates here both the dialogic structure of postsecular narrative, in which the three positions he defines are repeatedly put into play, and the outlines of postsecular thought itself, as it develops in text after text. This thought, as he says, stresses the fragility of the Earth and its preciousness. And it asks us to question the notions of absolute power embedded both in conventional monotheism and in secular humanism. These are the themes of a whole range of contemporary literary narratives. Thus *Angels in America* testifies to the fragility of the Earth by exploring the implications of the ozone hole, rejects the idea of a sovereign God by depicting a heaven without a king, mocks the rhetoric of human mastery through its treatment of Roy Cohn, and schools its protagonist, by way of an encounter with his own mortality, in a reverential appreciation for life and the Earth.

Connolly's astute reconstruction of a postsecular position goes to matters of thought and style as well as to its propositional structure. And here a certain tension emerges. Given that postsecularists affirm the "inexorable excess of being over structures of interpretation and identity" (156), accept

the contestabilty of the most powerfully helpful propositions, and reject the program of "conversion or conquest" (143) promoted by certain sacred texts and communities, they cannot be completely comfortable with the sort of assertive summary of their position cited above. For all these reasons, Connolly writes, they tend to weaken the presentation of their own beliefs not only by strategies of overt qualification but also by means of impious comedy ("laughter is a solvent of piety" [145]) and even blasphemy. Pynchon, DeLillo, Erdrich, and Kushner all adopt this strategy of ludic avowal. *Angels in America* is, among many other things, a spiritual comedy, and a whole range of contemporary novels—Pynchon's *Vineland*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, Erdrich's *Love Medicine*—also belong to this emergent genre. Absurd excess, extravagant impiety, and parody function in these works both to make the reintroduction of the religious palatable to secular-minded readers and to check the tendency of religious speculation to drift toward dogmatism and intolerance.

In *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, Connolly clarifies the broader political possibilities of the sort of weakening that we have been exploring. The productive weakening of all dogmatisms, he suggests, promotes a philosophically grounded public pluralism in which "multiple constituencies honoring a variety of moral sources and metaphysical orientations" operate in a public sphere where no constituency's claim to authority is sanctified. Instead, all parties recognize "the contestable character of the fundamental faith they honor most" (39). Connolly is cautiously optimistic in his assessment of the chances for such a development: "Significant currents already operative in contemporary life point toward [its] possible consolidation," he writes, "even as intense constituencies mobilize against that very possibility" (39).

The postsecular themes developed in contemporary theory and literature renounce, then, two salient features of traditional religiosity. They do not ascribe "transcendental authority" (Gourgouris 55) to an omnipotent divinity or proffer a set of ostensibly divine pronouncements—and a priestly class authorized to interpret them—to the multitude. And they do not invite the religious subject to define himself in any unqualified way as "the proper shadow of the transcendental" (Spivak 89), the sanctified earthly agent of a militant transcendental will identified with "power and grandeur." They suggest instead that the extraordinary does not speak in the totalizing language of dogmatic theology; that its promptings are partial, or plural, or only imperfectly decipherable to human ears. And they

interpret these promptings as grounds for belief in real but limited sources of spiritual support, for commitment to the good of others and the planet, and for acceptance of the stubborn imperfection, impurity, and mortality of human seeing and being. Postsecular religiosity, then, wants nothing to do with the comprehensive maps and scripts that are essential to sacred systems of domination. It disrupts the chain of command that runs from wrathful divinities through militant priests to a bellicose people. And, accepting its own contestability, it is ready, for profound and not just pragmatic reasons, to listen to and negotiate with others in a pluralistic public sphere. At the same time, however, it refuses the comprehensive maps and triumphalist playbooks of dogmatic secularism, which have their own bloody history.

The Crasser Supernaturalism of Contemporary Fiction

In spite of their instructive similarities, contemporary philosophical and literary postsecularisms diverge in at least one significant regard. One can sense, in Vattimo's and Rorty's treatment of weak religion, not only a deep respect for the religious but also a strong desire to de-emphasize its supernatural elements. Connolly is less committed to such a naturalization of the religious, but he too seems more comfortable affirming religious structures of feeling and ethics than addressing the supernatural beings and miraculous events traditionally understood to inspire them. None of these writers suggest that the impulse to reopen negotiations with the religious might be sponsored by extraordinary experiences such as Taylor's intimations of a greater reality or Eliade's affirmation of a "divine presence" at work in the world. Yet, as the theorists of magical realism and postmodernism remind us, contemporary literature is replete with instances of extraordinary, improbable, and miraculous events: one thinks not just of *Angels in America* but of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Paradise*, *Underworld*, *Love Medicine*, and a host of other works. The religious returns, in much postsecular fiction, with the vulgar exuberance of a tabloid headline.

This discrepancy with regard to the supernatural aspects of the religious marks a real difference within postsecular thinking. But the hypertrophied supernaturalism of much postsecular fiction is itself a strategy of weakening. And it, too, has its philosopher. Pynchon cites William James's *The*

Varieties of Religious Experience in *Vineland* with good reason, because in that august work James names and endorses Pynchon's own brand of supernaturalism. "If one should make a division of all thinkers into naturalists and supernaturalists," James writes, "I should undoubtedly have to go . . . into the supernaturalist branch" (565). And within that branch, he continues, he belongs "among the supernaturalists of the piecemeal or crasser type" (566), those mostly "uneducated people" who believe in "miracles and providential leadings" and are despised "in academic circles" (568). For James, Henry Levinson reminds us, this crasser supernaturalism affirmed " 'conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support' " (Levinson 67).

Such an endorsement might seem at once to place James and the postsecular novelists who share his enthusiasm in the camp of strong religion. But it does not. For unlike the crasser supernaturalists of the organized faiths, James incorporates and honors a diversity of supernatural entities, speculations, and experiences in his writing. Protestant ideas keep company here not only with the latest scientific theories but also with the unorthodox spiritualities of the transcendentalists, the therapeutic systems of the mind-cure movement, the nihilistic speculations of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, fragments of Buddhist and Hindu thought, and the social gospels of Tolstoy and the Unitarians. And the cosmological features of these various discourses all win a kind of qualified consent in his mind. Already, to paraphrase Lyotard's description of the postmodern condition, James seems to live at the intersection of a whole range of somewhat disintegrated, or weakened, discursive valences. "[A]ll the insights of creatures of a day like ourselves must be provisional" (365), James insists, and "we live in partial systems" (531), no one of which begins to exhaust the richness of the real. Words such as "partial," "provisional," "plural," and "piecemeal" function throughout his text to describe not only our knowledge of reality but reality itself. Yet these terms are not mobilized in the cause of radical skepticism: "To admit one's liability to correction is one thing," James declares, "and to embark upon a sea of wanton doubt is another" (364).

In one particularly remarkable statement, James imagines a pluralistic cosmos composed of many partial systems. "The experiences which we have been studying," he writes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "plainly show the universe to be a more many-sided affair than any sect,

even the scientific sect, allows for. . . . And why, after all, may not the world be so complex as to consist of many interpenetrating spheres of reality, which we can approach in alternation by using different conceptions and assuming different attitudes?" (137–38). James entertains here, if only for a moment, the idea that religious differences are a product not just of diverse systems of thought but also of a more extraordinary diversity in the very structure of the cosmos, which is imagined to contain—in some virtually unthinkable manner—a range of different but "interpenetrating" religious domains and divinities.

This speculative sketch is fleshed out, as it were, in a range of contemporary works of fiction, where domains and divinities proper to profoundly different supernatural traditions share space in a pluralistic universe. The world of *Vineland*, for instance, accommodates two different domains of the dead, one designed after the Bardo state of Tibetan Buddhism, the other a domain identified as the underworld of the Yurok, a Northern Californian Indian tribe. In *Paradise*, Christian characters are visited by Christian divinities and guides, while characters who embrace more Earth-centered and polytheistic practices are visited by the divinities proper to these traditions. The crasser supernaturalism keeps company, in these novels, as it does in James's work, with a peculiar sort of epistemological humility and ontological abundance: the suggestion is that all truths are potentially true, all realities are potentially real, but no truth and no reality is exclusively true or real. This vision of things—a kind of supernatural multiculturalism—produces its own sort of weak religiosity then, even as it affirms the crasser supernaturalism. And it represents the most radical narrative innovation of postsecular fiction in our time.

Preterite Spiritualities and Neomonastic Politics

It is in ways such as these, then, that postsecular thinkers effect a return to the religious that does not sponsor the fierce enclosure of consciousness identified with fundamentalism and its political militancies. One could argue, of course, that the only reasonable political response to today's resurgent, politically engaged, fundamentalisms is that of defending the political and intellectual traditions of secularism. But in a culture where spiritual intuitions and religious impulses, far from withering away, are so vigorously

reemerging, it could also be claimed that it is equally responsible to imagine vigorous forms of spiritual life disarticulated from the will to "power and grandeur" and from other predispositions fostered by traditional religious discourses and institutions.

In this sense, then, postsecular thought is political through and through. But conventional postsecular narratives are political in other ways as well. The martial arts Buddhist communities of *Vineland*, the Candomblé-influenced community of *Paradise*, and the street corner Christian congregation of *Underworld* all constitute what I will call, borrowing a term from Pynchon, "preterite" spiritualities. They arise in the cracks of the social order, among the anonymous and the excluded: gays in *Angels in America*, the urban poor in *Underworld*, working-class whites in *Vineland*, runaways in *Paradise*. And they bear the imprints of their origin. Scorning the codes of theological order and exclusivity that characterize "high" religious traditions, they develop modes of thought and practice that are scandalously impure. They directly address recognizable social evils—militant nationalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and the ongoing assault on the environment. And they seem to work: the characters who embrace them are spiritually regenerated and the communities themselves provide hints of new social practices and ideas.

By representing and valorizing such communities, postsecular fiction participates in a broader contemporary project. In the wake of the collapse of the large-scale organizations of the traditional left, contemporary progressive thinkers—Graeber, Blaug, Hardt, and Negri, for example—are paying considerable attention to spontaneously emerging, small-scale, and informally structured contrast communities. But the "prefigurative communities" (Graeber 72) they celebrate are cast in a familiar progressive mold. They tend to embody, that is to say, a familiar confidence in human powers and the emancipatory logic of history and to function as bases for the continuation of familiar forms of militancy. The preterite spiritual communities of postsecular fiction are cast in a different mold. They, too, are communities of resistance, but they are founded in and seek to foster dispositions that reflect a sense of human limitation and historical caution. And they make no claims to be the first, "prefigurative" flowerings of emancipated modes of being that will quickly become more general. Instead, they are dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly articulated political agenda.

It would be easy to dismiss the endorsement of this sort of alternative community in postsecular fiction as one more sign of the intractable eccentricity of literary treatments of the political. But a number of contemporary political thinkers do in fact imagine, and argue for, projects of resistance very close in several respects to those portrayed in postsecular fiction. These thinkers share a sense that the conventional political options of modernity are exhausted and its geopolitical order in crisis. And they find precedents for an enabling response to this crisis in the monastic movements of the early Christian era, when the Roman Empire collapsed, the "Dark Ages" descended, and monasteries became sites of refuge, reflection, and social support.

The conservative philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre develops this neomedieval and neomonastic analogy at the conclusion of his influential study, *After Virtue*. "It is always dangerous," MacIntyre writes,

> to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another, and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. None the less certain parallels are there. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. . . . We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (244–45)

There are striking parallels between the political vision and course of action recommended here and that traced out, sometimes fully, sometimes in a fragmentary manner, in postsecular novels. We may not find, in this fiction, anything like the organized efforts of some Christians to effect a neomonastic revival along MacIntyre's lines. But we do find narratives of

desertion from the projects of the imperium and the perspectives of existentialism (as in MacIntyre's allusion to Beckett) everywhere in contemporary fiction, from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* to DeLillo's *The Names* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The deserters in these works do go on, "often not recognizing fully what they [are] doing," to found spiritually inflected, quasi-religious communities of refuge and reformation, communities that are frequently based in monasteries or convents. Certain features of these communities would scandalize St. Benedict and perhaps even MacIntyre. And others might seem to prevent them from achieving the powers of endurance MacIntrye ascribes to traditional monasticism. But in spite of their fragility, the neomonastic communities of postsecular narratives do function as repositories for values and ways of life no longer nurtured in the larger society and as vessels of spiritual and social innovation.

The philosophical valorization of desertion, retreat, and loosely articulated communities of survival and resistance—a very weak politics—is by no means an exclusively conservative phenomenon. In the 1970s, when the first contemporary postsecular narratives were being published, Herbert Marcuse was calling on his fellow Marxists to reconsider their hostility to practices of inwardness and retreat. "The 'flight into inwardness,' " he wrote, and "the insistence on a private sphere may well serve as bulwarks against a society which administers all dimensions of human existence. Inwardness and subjectivity may well become the inner and outer space for the subversion of experience, for the emergence of another universe" (38). Historically, Marcuse argued, "the affirmation of . . . inwardness" enabled individuals to step out of "the network of exchange relationships . . . and [enter] another dimension of existence." Moreover, in many instances "withdrawal and retreat were not the last position. Subjectivity strove to break out of its inwardness into the material and intellectual culture" (4–5).

In these comments, Marcuse outlines a political argument for retreat and inwardness that is developed at greater length, and with a more explicit reference to the religious, by another leftist thinker, Rudolph Bahro. "Almost one and a half thousand years ago," writes Bahro,

> the Benedictines gave the new Western culture emerging from the collapse of Antiquity not only a very significant economic impulse . . . [but also] a meditative basis—hence "pray [first] and work"—upon which the whole social radiation of their practice was dependent. . . . We need a new

> Benedictine order. . . . [F]or a preparatory phase in which the model is crystallized, separation or dissociation from the remainder of society will outweigh association with it. . . . Without a retreat at times there will be no transformation of ourselves and no radical influence on the general consciousness. (90–91)

Like Marcuse, Bahro is pressing back against revolutionary traditions that celebrate relentless, ideologically driven, psychologically and spiritually indifferent, engagement. And like MacIntyre, he turns to the monastic model to figure forms of community that have not yet, or have only just, reemerged. His perspective is fully postsecular. This time, he insists, "spiritual culture will not be linked to a repressive monotheistic idea of God. . . . Social organization will not be linked to the separation of the sexes and sexual oppression" (91).

A final instance of this appeal to monastic precedents by progressive thinkers may serve to confirm both the durability and the diversity of this sort of speculation. In *Empire*, their widely read manifesto for a new revolutionary radicalism, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt insist that "the organizational formulas of the old revolutionary working class" are exhausted and that new struggles will be based not on "representational but constituent activity" (413), that is, on the work of a network of diverse cooperative communities. The work of these communities, they proclaim, will be "a project of love" (413). And it will resemble the work of a medieval Christian community. In the final paragraph of *Empire*, Hardt and Negri invite us to turn our attention to "an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future of communist militancy: that of Saint Francis of Assisi" and the communities he founded (413).

Both the choice, by these secular-minded thinkers, of yet another religious and monastic model of community and of St. Francis—as opposed to St. Benedictine—as an ideal are instructive here. For while the name Benedict conjures up a certain disciplined austerity—"pray and work"—St. Francis is identified, in *Empire* as elsewhere, with "a joyous life, including all of being and nature [and] the poor and exploited humans" (413). Francis's influence is strongly present in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and in William Connolly's vision of the postsecular. But contemporary literary neomonasticism turns as often to Benedictine as to Franciscan models.

Such calls for a neomonastic politics have had little or no apparent effect

on formal political thinking in our time. Yet they may well cast light on actual social practices, and they certainly illuminate the recipes for resistance implicit in a great deal of postsecular literature. So we find Tony Kushner attesting, in the afterword to *Angels in America*, to his own participation in a neomonastic project. "The world," Kushner writes, "howls without; it is at this moment a very terrible world." In response, we gather "friends, colleagues, comrades" and "[t]ogether we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery; and we help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace, and places from whence hope may plausibly be expected. . . . From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs" (2.155).

All the key tropes are here: the darkening world; the retreat into local communities of refuge; the discovery, in these soulful communities, of new, spiritually inflected sources of hope; the patient dedication to reflection and self-fashioning; and the dream of larger social possibilities on the horizon. In Kushner's representation, as in Marcuse's, "withdrawal and retreat [are] not the last position": the quest is for "paths of resistance." It is no accident, then, that at the end of *Angels in America*, when the main characters gather in Central Park under the wings of an angel, the topics of their discussion are both spiritual and political. The Soviet thaw, the issue of Palestine, and the future of the gay community are all raised. And when Prior declares, "We will be citizens" (2.148), he speaks both for his gay community and for the larger community of which it is a part.

The politics of engaged retreat endorsed by postsecular thinkers seems a plausible response to the situation described by Eric Hobsbawm at the end of his magisterial history of the twentieth century, *The Age of Extremes*: "The century ended," Hobsbawm writes, "in a global disorder whose nature was unclear, and without an obvious mechanism for either ending it or keeping it under control. . . . The reason for this impotence lay not only in the genuine profundity and complexity of the world's crises, but also in the apparent failure of all programmes, old and new, for managing or improving the affairs of the human race" (562–63). One hopes, of course, that the times are not as dark, the formal institutions of collective action not as irredeemably compromised, the options for transformation not as limited, as this neomonastic school of thought would suggest. But who can claim that such pessimism, such thoughts of retreat, survival, and local resistance

have no appeal, no plausibility today? Many of us live, as Kushner seems to, between practices of strategic retreat, local struggle, and more conventional forms of political engagement. And others will have canvassed, debated, or demonstrated with fellow activists representing all three positions, in the effort to check the worst impulses of the imperium.

Conclusion

The discussion of postsecular fiction, in the chapters that follow, is at once recursive and cumulative in its form. Each chapter discusses the work of a particular novelist or set of novelists. And each seeks to illuminate the patterns and preoccupations of postsecular fiction. But each chapter also focuses primarily on a specific aspect of the postsecular: on the ontological exuberance and "impurity" of Pynchon's work, on DeLillo's narratives of tentative conversion and quasi-religious congregation, on Morrison's political and polytheistic quarrel with patriarchal and fundamentalist traditions, on Native American novelists' efforts to imagine modes of postcolonial (re)turning, and on Michael Ondaatje's efforts to stake out a neomonastic, communitarian space of spiritual sustenance and political responsibility at the edges of Catholicism and Buddhism. Finally, each chapter explores the aesthetic dimensions of postsecularism, the ways in which the reintroduction of the religious shapes the rhetoric and style of individual works.

This is, then, an exercise in what Harold Bloom calls "religious criticism," an exercise in modes of "description, analysis, and judgment that [seek] to bring us closer to the workings of the religious imagination" (*American* 21). But it is also, in the end, an exercise in what Eve Sedgwick calls "reparative reading." I have gone to postsecular fiction, as the queer critics discussed by Sedgwick go to the queer fiction they explore, using the strategies of close reading to "[look] for important news"—news that could be of use—"without knowing what form that news will take" (2–3). This book is an effort to communicate the news I have discovered, in the hope that it will be of use not only to scholars of the texts and the period but to anyone trying to negotiate the difficult terrain where the spiritual and the secular meet in our time.

"Mason,—shall we argue Religious Matters?"
"Good Christ. Dixon. What are we about?"
—Mason & Dixon

He must tell Christian everything he knows,
everything he suspects or has dreamed. Proclaiming none
of it for truth.
—Gravity's Rainbow

I Ontological Pluralism and Preterite Spiritualities
Thomas Pynchon

There's a tension between the readings of Thomas Pynchon's fiction that constitute what might be called "Pynchon studies" and those that could be gathered under the heading of studies in postmodernism. From early on, many of Pynchon's close readers have registered, with interest, unease, or dismay, his preoccupation with religious discourses, narratives, and models of the real. They have noted that the world of Pynchon's novels is richly and strangely seamed with religious terms and concepts, story forms, and figures and that the worlds he renders incorporate important features of a whole range of religious ontologies. And they have explored the aesthetic and thematic function of these elements. (See, for instance, the early reviews and essays collected by George Levine and David Leverenz in *Mindless Pleasures*, Edward Mendelson's essay "The Sacred, the Profane,

and *The Crying of Lot 49*," David Cowart's and David Porush's essays in the *Vineland Papers*, Kathryn Hume's *Pynchon's Mythography*, or Steven Weisenburger's invaluable notes and commentary in *A "Gravity's Rainbow" Companion*.) More recently, in an essay on *Mason & Dixon*, David Cowart speaks of "the mounting evidence of Pynchon's spiritual and metaphysical (even religious) seriousness" ("Luddite" 381). And Joseph Dewey, in "The Sound of One Man Clapping," shows how *Mason & Dixon*'s protagonists, caught in the rush of Enlightenment enthusiasms, repeatedly glimpse and then lose sight of religiously rooted alternatives to the secular modes of thought blighting their lives and the nation they are founding.

But the Pynchon who figures in postmodernist theory rarely if ever gets discussed in these terms. This is so even when the critical focus falls on the dramatic ontological innovations of postmodernism in general and Pynchon's work in particular. Nineteenth-century realists and twentieth-century modernists, Brian McHale argues in his influential study, *Postmodernist Fiction*, were preoccupied with epistemological issues. They took it for granted that a single consistently ordered reality undergirds all experience but found the work of "getting down" to that reality increasingly difficult. Postmodernism emerges, McHale argues, when both the assumption and the effort collapse, when fundamental reality begins to seem intractably, profoundly unknowable and even plural. At this point we begin to see a proliferation of multiworld texts of all kinds, from the intricate puzzle-world fiction of Borges to the sprawling, magical realist novels of Garcia-Marquez and the postmodernist fiction of Pynchon.

McHale's account of the shift of "dominants" has been extremely influential and useful. But his explanation of the shift—that is, of the impulse to and project of postmodernism—needs to be complicated. He ascribes the shift, in the introductory chapters to *Postmodernist Fiction*, to two crises. The first is the epistemological crisis of confidence in rational and empirical modes of investigation, modes that were widely believed to offer clear and certain knowledge. As McHale shows, texts such as *Absalom, Absalom!* actually dramatize this moment of crisis, the moment when individuals trying to get to the bottom of a situation conclude that the project is impossible and give it up. This moment, according to McHale, produces a reaction into "projection": if *the* world cannot be fathomed, if the truth cannot be discovered, then one is free to "project" a range of worlds, to "*fictionalize*" (10, emphasis in the original). The works that this shift produces are

exuberantly antimimetic, uninterested in rendering the world as it actually is. They constitute instead a "playground for ontological improvisation" (54).

The second development sponsoring postmodernist fiction, McHale suggests, is the unprecedented intermixing of diverse communities and images in "advanced industrial cultures." In the contemporary world, people live not only among cultural others but also in a flood of "secondary realities, especially [those produced in] mass-media fictions" (38). The ontological playfulness of postmodernist fiction, its introduction of multiple worlds both secular and sacred, is intended, according to this argument, to convey the texture experience within this vertiginous reality. While postmodernism is playfully fabulous, then, it is also mimetic, not at the level of its content, "which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic" but rather "at the level of form" (38).

One effect of this argument is to head off any sustained consideration of the content of various worlds projected in contemporary fiction, content that is often explicitly religious, and to fix attention instead on the implications of their juxtaposition. Another is to reinstate the common sense, secular conception of reality that postmodernist fiction seems to challenge. For in spite of McHale's many references to worlds in the plural, each with its unique laws, layers, and powers, the only nonliterary pluralism he acknowledges in *Postmodernist Fiction* is the familiar pluralism of "worldviews" (52). And the only kind of space actually capable of hosting "many incommensurable and mutually exclusive worlds" (44) is said to be the imaginary space of literature; they can exist "nowhere but in the written text itself" (45). What is left largely unexplained, as a consequence, is the possibility that at least some postmodernists might be seriously engaged in challenging secular constructions of reality and entertaining the idea of a profoundly pluralistic universe.

McHale, in his canvassing of current theories of ontological pluralism, turns briefly to descriptions of ontologically innovative literature that point to these alternative explanations of its project. Thomas Pavel, McHale reports, is interested in "ontologically complex, multiple-world texts" like the Renaissance plays that stage a "confrontation . . . between a bi-planar, other-worldly ontology and a single-plane, this-worldly ontology" (34), that is between the sacred cosmos of Christianity, with its several stacked domains and its rich array of beings, and the flatter, less dramatically var-

ious world of the new humanism. I would suggest that Pavel's paradigm, which takes for granted the seriousness of the confrontations staged in Renaissance works, casts useful light on the similar but by no means identical confrontations now being staged in contemporary literature, at the end of the era of secular hegemony that began during the Renaissance.

Pynchon himself prompts us toward such an understanding of his project. For as critics have noted, *Gravity's Rainbow* contains a number of references to, and echoes of, the theories of Max Weber. It was Weber, mentioned by name in the text (464), who wrote some one hundred years ago, about the "disenchantment of the world." Weber located the origins of this process in the history of Judaism and Christianity, traditions that rebuked and defeated older, animistic religions. With Calvinism, he argued, the evacuation of all spiritual forces from the world and the rationalization of daily life reached unprecedented degrees of development and sponsored secular science, technological innovation, capitalism, and bureaucratization. (In *Gravity's Rainbow*, these processes are at work even within some surviving supernatural zones: witches "either come to the Brocken-complex with a bureaucratic career in mind, or . . . leave it" [718].) Within the "tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order," Weber writes, "the technical and economic conditions of machine production . . . determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism . . . with irresistible force" and will continue to do so "until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt." Under these conditions, he continues, humans are doomed to pass their lives in "an iron cage" (*Protestant Ethic* 181).

Pynchon's indebtedness to Weber is immediately obvious from this passage. *Gravity's Rainbow* bodies forth the "tremendous cosmos" of the modern order. It tracks the existence of individuals who from birth are the helpless creatures of that order: children of empire, or of the chemical industry, or of the war, or of IG Farben. It muses alchemically on the link between the order and the combustible elements—coal, oil, uranium—that empower it. And it offers us innumerable images of human incarceration, not only within cages of iron (the London underworld of the first scene) but also within bureaucratic structures (the whole espionage apparatus) and, in a gesture that updates Weber, Gottfried's shroud of plastic. We are, the novel declares, in the last stages of "the grim rationalizing of the World" (588).

But if Pynchon offers us a darkly vivid picture of Weber's world, it is not simply in order to echo Weber's proclamation that rationalization is

irresistible. *Gravity's Rainbow* is designed both to drive home the power of this order and to begin exploring ways to break its spell. So for instance the reader is directly exhorted, on more than one occasion, to question the representation of the universe as fully rationalized and disenchanted. And so we are introduced, page by astonishing page, to a universe more tremendous even than that of secular science, an expanded cosmos that accommodates not one enchanted system but many.

Pynchon represents his own interrogation of a single-plane, this-worldly ontology, then, as an act of resistance to a dominant scientific-technical-corporate regime hostile to life itself and to more survivable spiritual constructions of the real and the good. He represents the scientific discourses of disenchantment as partial mystifications that not only exile people from a "kinder universe" and its powers (726) but also remake that universe and put the very existence of living beings at risk. And he suggests that these ostensibly secular discourses may have supernatural as well as human sponsors: that rationalization is the work of cosmic agents that rationalized discourses render unthinkable. The confrontation between these powers and more benignant ones, as Dwight Eddins, Tom LeClair, and others argue, shapes the landscape, plot, and style of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*. On the one hand, in these texts, there are the powers (human and superhuman) aligned with domination and control. Eddins, in a groundbreaking study of the religious themes of the novel, calls these forces gnostic. Arrayed against them are forces, once again superhuman and human, that would shape existence in terms of the reciprocal relatedness of the many beings inhabiting the Earth, human and nonhuman alike. In so constructing his fiction, and in endorsing "Orphic" and ecological forces, Pynchon aligns himself with those larger movements in secular and religious culture that are responding to environmental crisis. That his approach incorporates both secular discourses (as Tom LeClair shows in *The Art of Excess*) and religious discourses (as Eddins shows in *The Gnostic Pynchon*) should make us suspicious of the secular/sacred dichotomy and give us a clearer sense of the hybrid discourses I am calling postsecular. Pynchon is attempting both to reenchant the world and to change the very terms of enchantment.

But to situate Pynchon in the context of these contemporary struggles over conflicting understandings of the Earth is to explain only certain aspects of his ontological practice. To explain other aspects—his introduction of supernatural beings from a whole range of worlds, for instance, or his

improvisation of new realms that seem to be derived from comic books and B movies rather than from sacred scriptures—we need to situate his thought in the context of ethical and political concerns most powerfully articulated by secular postmoderns. His sense that "stories" are simultaneously essential to human understanding and ultimately untrue resonates with deconstruction. His pluralism rhymes not only with well-established traditions of secular democratic thinking but also with the spirit of a time in which any attempt to establish a single norm, or a single truth, is viewed by progressive political thinkers with entirely warranted, historically hard-won suspicion. And his exuberant mingling of high spiritual traditions with commercialized vernaculars bespeaks a powerfully democratic and anarchistic distrust of classical norms and hierarchies. Pynchon is as insistent on the necessity of learning from Las Vegas, in other words, as the architect Robert Venturi and as invested in certain anarchist ideals as the protesters in Seattle who demonstrated against the World Trade Organization in 1999. These secular commitments shape his negotiations with the religious and his efforts to achieve Eliade's goal of reenchantment without reenclosure.

Demystification in Reverse

The trouble with "reenchantment" as a term for the description of the kinds of turning we find in Pynchon is that it can easily be understood as designating a purely affective transformation, one aligned, perhaps, with the dazzlement that DeLillo identifies with postmodern moral pliability in *Players* or with the "intensities" Fredric Jameson identifies with postmodern moral weightlessness in *Postmodernism*. It can be imagined as unfolding, in other words, in an ethical vacuum. But when Weber and those who have followed him speak of an enchanted cosmos, they freight the phrase with a range of more substantial meanings. This cosmos, in contrast to the cosmos of disenchantment, is simultaneously indelibly mysterious and meaningfully ordered, dangerous to humans and seamed with elusive sources of support, full of temptations and ethically instructive. To be disenchanted is to lose sight of all these aspects of the cosmos—to believe for instance, as Weber puts it, that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play" in the world, and that, as a result, "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" ("Science as a Vocation" 139). It

is to deny the existence of "magical and sacramental forces" (*Protestant* 105), the domains from which they emerge, the channels by which they course through the quotidian world, the good and evil work they do, and the superhuman beings who orchestrate this work. Finally, it is to deny that the universe is ethically ordered and edifying (Taylor, *Sources* 93–94), that humans must attend to it in determining values or suffer the consequences of their inattention. These claims find expression in the ancient religious and magical traditions displaced by modern monotheisms and infuse certain powerful monotheistic traditions as well. And they leave their traces within secularism itself, which is simultaneously religion's other and the inheritor of many religious energies and ideas, some useful, others destructive.

Gravity's Rainbow repeatedly challenges the ontological precepts of disenchantment. "What if," one character wonders, "They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's *in Their interest* to have you believing that?" (697, emphasis in the original). The "They" here are the nameless conspiracy of corporate chiefs, bureaucrats, and scientists that govern the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the truth "They" preach is "Rocket state-cosmology": a secular, scientific definition of the universe as inert matter subject to infinite manipulation (726). It's in the context of this particular strand of secularization that Pynchon raises the possibility of a different definition of the world. Perhaps, a nameless voice suggests, what we are taught to see as discrete entities absolutely separated in space and time actually float in or on a common element: an "Aether sea to bear us world-to-world might bring us back a continuity, show us a kinder universe, more easygoing" (726).

This kinder order of things seems to become visible in the several episodes where mediums contact and "channel" spirits from beyond the grave. But even as he affirms the existence of this order, Pynchon suggests that the process Weber calls rationalization blinds modern subjects to its existence, so that the mediums themselves cannot believe in the mysterious "continuity" between the living and the dead that their experiences seem to verify. The gifted medium Carroll Eventyr "knows how close he is to Sachsa on the other side, but he doesn't *remember*, and he's been brought up a Christian, a Western European, believing in the primacy of the 'conscious' self and its memories, regarding all the rest as abnormal or trivial"

(153). Indeed, the conditioning is so successful that many people become actively complicit in their own mystification. There are, the narrator insists, "presences we are not supposed to be seeing—wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods—that we train ourselves away from to keep from looking further even though enough of us do" (720). So the Soviet soldier Tchitcherine has trained himself away from a sense of a life after death: "There is no life after death," the Russian proclaims, staunchly. But the narrator tells us that "Tchitcherine means he's had to fight to believe in his mortality. . . . Fight down all his hopes, fight his way into that bitterest of freedoms" (704). Pynchon himself has a certain respect for this fight. But he suggests as well that mortality, like atheism and the scientific view of the cosmos, is not a transparent fact but part of a bitter (and also freeing) story modern humans have been taught to teach themselves. In the spirit-filled counteruniverse sketched out in these passages and elsewhere in the text, things are perhaps less bitter. Human beings are part of a living cosmos; there are extraterrestrial domains out there in what they call a "void"; the Earth itself is seamed with "power sources" and "routes of power our teachers never imagined" (521), and human lives in time may extend beyond the absolute terminal point marked by "death." Disenchantment, in these passages, is the effect of a deliberate and deeply interested pedagogical offensive rather than the truth of nature. And contesting it—recovering a sense of the enchanted universe—is fighting toward a friendlier sort of freedom.

Or so it seems in certain passages. In others, it is clear that enchantment does not restore humans to the world of Sunday School Bible illustrations or New Age pastoralism. On the contrary, the divinities banished by science reappear both in terrifying forms and in baffling, wildly disorienting, profusion. Some, like the Angel that hovers over Lübeck during the terrible raids, seem indifferent to human suffering; others, the Qlippoth ("the Rocket's guardian demons" [748]) that help organize the world for rationalization and war, are outright malevolent. And even the kinder spirits of the Earth, Pynchon's wind gods and sunset gods and the Earth itself as "living critter" (590), are perhaps "too violently pitched alive in constant flow" (720) to accommodate human dreams of secure abiding. Faith in such a context can only be partial, anxious, uncertain. How then is Pynchon's universe ordered, if it is ordered at all? And what are the implications, for humans, of its ordering?

Pynchon and William James

In her groundbreaking work, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, Molly Hite offers a strong but also emphatically secular account of Pynchon's ontological pluralism. Hite argues persuasively that Pynchon's work offers no standard of ultimate reality or unreality; instead, it represents the real as an amalgam of "multiple partial, overlapping, and often conflicting" ideas of organization (10). This is a most useful description, but Hite's account of the place of religious systems in Pynchon's work is perfunctory and dismissive. She argues that because the novel refuses to disclose any single "sacred and transcendent order" (17) or to offer a chart of "providential history" (99), it constitutes a "secular history" (99), written from within the stream of time and expressing the finite vision of human beings.

Traditionally, of course, the religious perspective has been identified in the West with just the sort of ontological and historical univocalism that Hite sees Pynchon rejecting: with the projection, from a perspective of certainty, of a total picture of the cosmos and a single master narrative of redemptive history. Eddins, in his rich reading of Pynchon's "orphic naturalism," challenges Hite's reading on this ground by arguing that *Gravity's Rainbow* does in fact have a holy center, the living and ultimately beneficent Earth. But Hite's challenge can be met in another manner as well. For she overlooks, in making this argument for Pynchon's secularism, the work of a preeminent American pluralist, William James, whom Pynchon cites in *Vineland*. James's version of pluralism, I want to argue, provides a more useful gloss on Pynchon's ontological practices and perspective than either McHale's or Hite's. For almost a century ago, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James sought to rethink the religious (and to rescue it from secular disparagement) from a pluralist perspective. "A final philosophy of religion," he wrote, "will have to consider the pluralistic hypothesis more seriously than it has hitherto been willing to consider it" (572). James stipulates against the idea that any "one all-inclusive God" (571) guarantees the "absolute unity" (571) of the cosmos but advocates a "sort of polytheism" (571) that would honor the local validity of the great religious and secular traditions. I have already cited the following passages, but I want to do so again here, since they so strikingly anticipate Pynchon's ontological practices. Referring back to the extraordinary range of religious experiences

he has been canvassing, James writes that, "The experiences which we have been studying . . . plainly show the universe to be a more many-sided affair than any sect, even the scientific sect, allows for. . . . The obvious outcome of our total experience is that the world can be handled according to many systems of ideas, and is so handled by different men. . . . Evidently, then, the science and the religion are both of them genuine keys" (137–38). In this passage James might be interpreted as advocating a discursive and epistemological pluralism: a readiness to explore the massively complex reality of a single, ultimately coherent cosmos by means of analysis and by means of a variety of useful maps. But he moves on immediately to speculate on the possibility that the pluralism he is discussing goes all the way down, or at least much farther than conventional thinking would allow. "And why, after all" he continues, "may not the world be so complex as to consist of many interpenetrating spheres of reality?" (138). Without falling into positivism, James asks us here to imagine an universe "so complex" that it accommodates, in some mysterious way, not just "many systems of ideas" but "many interpenetrating spheres of reality." The "many" here underlines the capacious pluralism of this model, while the "interpenetrating" stipulates that these spheres, being only semiautonomous, at some point react on one another.

Pynchon takes something like this radically pluralist and unconventionally religious intuition as his point of departure in his fiction. He certainly shares James's suspicion of totalizing discourses: like his character Enzian, he tells us "everything he knows, everything he suspects or has dreamed. Proclaiming none of it for truth" (728). But what he "knows" is also Jamesian: the worlds of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Mason & Dixon* accommodate beings, domains, and energies drawn from a diverse range of religious and spiritual "spheres of reality" and operate as well, locally and partially, according to the "laws" of secular scientific understanding. No single system or sphere of reality emerges as dominant in these texts, although Pynchon expresses a strong preference for two traditions, Eddin's "orphic" ecospirituality and Buddhism. And no single salvation story orders the texts either, but that does not means that Pynchon's view of history, any more than James's, is secular.

James handles religious issues and ideas in several other ways that anticipate Pynchon's work. In contrast to the intellectual elite of his time, he identifies himself with the "crasser . . . supernaturalism" (565): the sort that

affirms "miracles and providential leadings" (565), mysterious auditions, visitations, and gods. Furthermore, he is ready to venture, in his search for religious experience, beyond the borders of the major traditions, into the marginalized and often commercialized world of spiritualists and faith healers. He affirms, as Pynchon will, that the practices and experiences of the religious life can be profoundly enabling. Finally, he is politically as well as religiously pluralist—a member of the New England Anti-Imperialist League and a supporter of other progressive causes. His anti-imperialism, like Pynchon's, is based on a distrust of vast systems. He stood, Frank Lentricchia writes, against "the big organization" in any form and desired "the liberation of the small, the regional, the locally embedded, the underdog" (230). I suggest, in what follows, that Pynchon's pluralism is Jamesian in these several respects. It is deliberately outrageous in its embrace of the crasser supernaturalism. It is open to forms of spirituality—Buddhism and other Eastern traditions, nature religion, the occult, martial arts mysticism, certain forms of evangelicalism—that tend to get marginalized by mainstream religious thinkers and secularists alike. It celebrates the psychologically and ethically bracing effects of certain religious experiences and practices. And its political and religious dimensions are mutually informing.

But Pynchon's pluralistic universe is in the end a turbulent and troubled place, wracked by strife and threatened by malevolent cosmic forces. Not only humankind but divinities and their domains have their own histories, of course, even in the great monotheistic traditions. Christian scripture tells a story of rebellion and innovation on the terrain of the divine: as Satan rebels and falls and comes to power on Earth, as Jesus is begotten and dies and is born again, profound changes reshape the domain of divinity as well as that of humankind. Pynchon's pluralistic cosmos is equally mutable. Indeed, it is the site, or so *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests, of a series of catastrophic ontological innovations. Monotheism and the emergence and imagination of Calvinism's ferocious Jehovah add a new and dangerous "sphere of reality" to the world and set dangerous supernatural and human energies to work, energies that threaten to destroy diversity itself through "the grim rationalizing of the World" (588). And a related process described as "the perversion of magic" (277) spawns new masters of manipulation—the scientists—whose work threatens to destroy the world (588). "[Y]ou had dispensed with God," a "spirit" from the "other side" ex-

plains to Carroll Eventyr at a séance, "But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion of control" (30). In a series of passages scattered throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon paints the triumph of this illusion as a long, slow process overseen from the outset, and still overseen, in the age of secularism, by superhuman forces. These forces are not content to take their place within a pluralistic cosmos; instead, they constitute diversity-threatening developments within the plural. Thus, in the name of the plural, they must, Pynchon suggests, be opposed. His pluralistic universe, then, is darker and more dramatically agonistic than James's.

Orphic contra Gnostic: Pynchon's Ontological Preferences

Dwight Eddins's *Gnostic Pynchon* is an essential resource for anyone interested in understanding Pynchon's religious investments. For Eddins, Pynchon is a religious novelist and *Gravity's Rainbow*, his greatest work, is nothing less than "a gospel of Earth" (149), a "Torah of Orphic naturalism, revealing the nature of gnostic evil at the same time that it reveals the Way Back to communion with Earth" (150). In a learned and scrupulous reading, Eddins argues that two great forces contend for hegemony within the "metaphysically volatile" (110) cosmos of the novel. Both forces are "marked by mystical and supernatural manifestations" (111), both have their human and institutional elements, and for both the "ascendency at stake involves the question of ontological primacy" (133) and even "the right to define ultimate reality" (111). Eddins labels the first force, or "complex of forces" (110), gnosticism, both because ancient gnosticism captures the acosmic tone of this movement, its hatred of earthly things and dreams of radical transcendence, and because the gnostic universe swarms with superhuman beings bent on domination and destruction. Pynchon, Eddins shows, refers repeatedly to gnostic cosmological and soteriological themes and sees gnostic ideas and forces surfacing again and again, shaping history, first in the original Jewish and Christian movements themselves, then in Kabbalism and again in Calvinism, and finally in Weber's new Calvinist elite of scientists, technicians, corporate chiefs, and bureaucrats. Dreams of "cosmic domination" (132) inspire all of these movements; and all are backed, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, by superhuman powers and principalities.

Opposing them, Eddins contends, is an equally loose coalition of "Orphic" forces, a combination of gods, ultimate processes, institutions, ideas and living beings, human and nonhuman. Eddins labels these forces Orphic in part because *Gravity's Rainbow*, as he shows, contains innumerable references both to the classical myth of the nature-loving Orpheus and to Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. But he leaves no doubt that what he calls Orphism is a version of that "nature religion," grounded in animistic traditions, that has played a major role in Western literary culture since the nineteenth century and that has been dramatically reinvigorated, over the past fifty years or so, by environmental crisis. Pynchon's Earth, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is Orphic in several respects. It is alive with spirits; they live in trees ("each tree is a creature, carrying on its individual life" [552–53]), and streams ("[t]here are harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers" [622]), and stones (760). It invites and rewards reverent attention. It is designed to sustain life through natural cycles of return; and it will help those who listen to recognize the logic and beauty of its ways. Geli Tripping, the young witch, is an Orphic wisdom figure; the Hereros of recent memory an Orphic community, and Slothrop, as we shall see, a convert to Orphism.

The very name of Pynchon's novel figures these two forces and their clashing. The sign of modern gnostic aspiration is the rocket's disastrous and gravity-determined trajectory, a thrust toward transcendence that ends by raining death on all below. In this context, the phrase "gravity's rainbow" seems to cancel God's promise of protection sealed in the divinely sponsored rainbow of Genesis. But the promise of Orphism is also a matter of gravity and rain: its exemplary figure is given by the forms of water (including the rainbow), which move in perpetual cycles of transformation from above to below and back again, sustaining life. In this Orphic context, "gravity's rainbow" suggests an order that is Earth- and life-affirming and profoundly ethical. In the novel itself, Pynchon draws this distinction explicitly. The archetypal symbol of the great serpent with its tail in its mouth announces, he writes, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning" (412). But the gnostic party constitutes "a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, . . . removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy [he is referring, here, to the chemical industry in particular] to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit" and dragging down "innocent souls all along the chain of life" (412). Note the way in which the ontological

order, here, grounds ethics—the imperative is to share, to take and give back—and orients us politically, too, in opposition to any system that violates the Cycle. Pynchon's Orphic world is thickly enchanted.

Eddins's argument that *Gravity's Rainbow* endorses an Earth-centered spirituality is persuasive, but I would argue that the novel's affirmation of the Orphic universe is not perhaps as exclusive as Eddins suggests. For instance, as Eddins recognizes, Pynchon discovers strands of Orphic thinking in Christianity and Buddhism, traditions that focus on other domains as well as the Earth, in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*. Perhaps the novelist is not interested in foreclosing, then, on all transcendentalisms, but only those that radically discredit and seek to destroy what is earthly. This is borne out, I think, in the story of Lyle Bland, who blunders into certain magical practices that enable him first to leave his body and then to experience, from this perspective, the Orphic "wonder of finding that Earth is a living critter" (590). (*Gravity's Rainbow* was published, Tom LeClair notes in *The Art of Excess*, six years before J. E. Lovelock published *Gaia* [42].) Bland's journey seems to be carrying him beyond the Earth, seen here as threatened by the gnostic forces of "replication [and] waste" (590). But Pynchon does not tell us in what direction he is being led nor does he denigrate his "voyaging." Lyle, departing, looks a little silly wearing a simple white smock and holding a rose, and he seems to be leaving behind the "rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment" (590). But Pynchon locates him in the heroic company of the great polar explorers who did not return from their voyages and who by not returning, he claims, achieved a "victory" (589). He implicitly invites us, in other words, to remain interested in domains beyond the Earth and in "techniques of voyage" (589) designed to access them, as long as these domains and the discourses by which we approach them also affirm the wonder of the Earth itself.

Orphic appreciation of the Earth, then, is a necessary element of the spiritual positions Pynchon finds most attractive, but Orphism does not offer an exhaustive map of spiritual possibilities, and its gods and orders are not, perhaps, the only ones worthy of respect. Kathryn Hume's observation that the novel's many angels "belong to Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and poetic metaphysics" (*American Dream* 137) captures the centrifugal energies of the novel, its deliberate weakening of any claim to exclusivity. It is the novel's refusal to grant exclusive rights of definition even to Orphism that make Eddins's representation of it as another Torah or gospel problematic.

These texts seek to circumscribe the world they describe within the terms of a single order, but Pynchon, who is in this sense more characteristically postmodern than Eddins will allow, suggests that the Orphic ecospirituality he endorses with such urgency is not the only mode of understanding and mapping the horizons of the cosmos. As we shall see, *Vineland*'s universe is similarly polyvalent: mappable in terms of Buddhist cartographies but also in terms of those of Native American spirituality and Christianity. Once again, the here and now of earthly life is privileged but not to the exclusion of Earth-honoring practices of vision and transcendence. No single system, discursive or ontological, is given "the right to define ultimate reality" (Eddins 111). Instead, as David Cowart puts it in a discussion of Pynchon's deployment of multiple myths, the novel introduces a set of "closure-resistant, open, multivalent" ontologies ("Attenuated" 9), which "coexist at the edge of a mutually deconstructive exclusivity" (8).

It's in his interest in categories such as grace and karma, perhaps, that Pynchon steps most dramatically out of the Orphic sphere and into other visions of ultimate reality. For while these notions are up to a point reconcilable with an Earth-positive, cyclical spirituality, in that they share the sense of an ultimately benignant, ethically ordered world, grace emerges from the vocabulary of Christianity and comes trailing ideas of a divinity actively engaged in shaping human destinies, and karma is a theory of immanent justice that casts the universe itself as a school for Buddhas and bodhisattvas. If these principles of ultimate order seem at times to be plucked out of the systems in which they were traditionally embedded, they still cannot be understood in any adequate way without reference to these systems. And in this way, too, Pynchon resists reducing the world either to a single, coherent domain or to a battlefield hosting two and only two opposing forces.

The place of grace in Pynchon's ontological musings is characteristically postmodern in a second respect as well. It produces the effect of "weakening" recommended by Vattimo. Just as Ondaatje will dramatically "weaken" the notion of the miraculous "gift" of clairvoyance in *The English Patient*, turning it in a "limited gift" (300), so Pynchon weakens and yet preserves the gift of grace. Perhaps, *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests repeatedly, we live neither under the guarantees of Christian grace nor in the godless, indifferent world of secularist thinking. Perhaps some sort of partial or "minimum grace" (603) is operative in the world, and there are "pro-

visions for balancing things out once in a while" (580). That is, if "not all children are preserved," it is also true that "not all lemmings go over the cliff" (729). If things often go terribly wrong, "there is also help when least looked for . . . a few small chances for mercy" (610). So Ludwig, Slothrop's young friend, finds his lost lemming, and some of the human lemmings in *Gravity's Rainbow* draw up short in their race to embrace destruction. And so while the child Bianca is destroyed, the child Ilse, if her mother's dream is correct, survives the war and "will not be used" (610). Again and again in Pynchon's work, a fundamental element of a specific religious ontology is weakened but retains a certain shaky power: it is taken out of its original context and combined with alien elements, challenged, and revised, but it continues to preoccupy characters and to correspond, up to a point, with what seems—although one can never be sure—to be going on.

Postsecular Conversion

If *Gravity's Rainbow*'s ontological experimentation as well as its preservation and partializing of several great traditions marks it as an exemplary text in the postsecular narrative tradition that is the subject of this study, so does its recuperation and reinvention of traditional sacred story forms. Pynchon has been drawn to such stories of conversion and spiritual formation from the very beginning of his career: *V.* contains a hilarious parody of the imperial conversion narrative (Father Fairing's mission to the rats), and *The Crying of Lot 49* is, as David Cowart notes, a "kind of oblique spiritual autobiography or conversion narrative" ("Attentuated" 4). Stories of conversion and spiritual formation are, of course, a staple of religious discourse. They trace fundamental shifts of perspective and practice. Sometimes these shifts conduct those who experience them from one faith to another. In other cases, the shift is from mere nominal belief to heartfelt commitment, as in many of the stories collected by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. And in still other versions, a secular subject finds his way to one of the great faith traditions. All these forms of conversion figure in the dense web of stories that is *Gravity's Rainbow*. But the novel's attention centers on another sort of conversion, characteristic of postsecular narrative, in which the turn from secularism is toward some only faintly affirmed, or weakly articulated, or dramatically marginal form of spirituality.

Such is the shape, for instance, of the hilarious micronarrative of Lyle Bland's transformation. Introduced by accident or hidden design to the "Old magic" (589) of Masonic ritual, the Boston capitalist has an out-of-body experience and is "off on a journey. He knew he couldn't keep from going on with it" (589). When after some further practice he is able to turn and look back on his body, his faith in the new path is sealed; "he felt it as a turn not so much in space as in his own history. Irreversible. The Bland who came back to rejoin the inert white container he'd seen belly-up on the sofa, thousands of years beneath him, had changed forever" (589). Once a dedicated businessman and family patriarch, Bland now spends most of his time perfecting "techniques of voyage" taught to him by seedy spiritualists "and hardly any at all down on State Street" in Boston's financial district (589). He is following a different schedule, perfecting different practices, for a different purpose. His voyaging, overseen by a host of teachers, not only introduces him to a new understanding of the universe (the Earth as a "living critter") but also reshapes his emotional life. Reintroduced to "wonder," feeling "like a child again," he prefers his new way of being to the pleasures of power (590). In the end, like so many pilgrims, from Buddha and the disciples of Jesus to Bunyan's Christian, he deserts all of his worldly posts and disappears. " 'I want you to know I love you all,' " he says to his family. " 'I'd stay here if I could, but I have to go' " (591). As a convert to a widely disparaged form of spiritualism, Bland, in his happiness, is a living repudiation both of the secular style of being he so readily abandons and of the dour Protestantism of his native Boston, which will have nothing to do with the techniques of voyaging he embraces and the vision of the Earth that he affirms in wonder.

Bland's story is related at a point in *Gravity's Rainbow* when it is becoming increasingly clear that the novel is powerfully preoccupied with processes of conversion and spiritual formation. It is metamorphosing, that is to say, from what has seemed to be a dark comedy of conspiracy and detection into the story of "Slothrop's Progress" (25), a radically revised version of Calvinism's most famous conversion narrative. In the narrative's skepticism regarding our ability to save ourselves, as in its depiction of a redemptive change that would seem to have very little to do with merit, we see traces of John Bunyan's understanding of salvation. But in its interest in eliminating the fatal distinction between chosen and preterite, in its affirmation of earthy, natural goodness, and in its understanding of "immortality," the

novel presses back, as it does on the ontological plane, against the Calvinist tradition.

The Slothrop we meet at the outset of the novel is well-meaning but self-absorbed, given to prayer at moments of crisis but otherwise preoccupied with carnal matters, content to ride out the war as a functionary in the London military bureaucracy. A "Saint George after the fact" (24), he shows up on the battlefield not to slay dragons but to produce reports on the carnage they cause. This carnage gradually destroys the vestiges of his conventional belief: "When he couldn't help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God . . . for life to win out. But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped" (24). There is no suggestion of struggle or suffering in this briefest of deconversion narratives. Conventional faith fails, in the middle of the twentieth century, with an ease that registers its exhaustion.

In a second, more ambitious, micronarrative of secularization, Pynchon discovers the consequences of this failing in the features of Victorian architecture. St. Veronica's Hospital is

> a Victorian paraphrase of what once, long ago, resulted in Gothic cathedrals —but which, in its own time, arose not from any need to climb through the fashioning of suitable confusions toward any apical God, but more in a derangement of aim, a doubt as to the God's actual locus (or, in some, as to its very existence), out of a cruel network of sensuous moments that could not be transcended and so bent the intentions of the builders not on any zenith, but back to fright, to simple escape, in whatever direction. (46)

One might take this passage as an oblique commentary on the dangers facing a novelist unsure of "the God's actual locus . . . or . . very existence" and hence on the structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself, but I think that would be to underestimate the novel's achievements. I want to offer it, then, rather as a gloss on the problems that overtake Slothrop in the wake of his deconversion. Haunted by intimations of a primal conditioning he cannot recall, dispatched on a mission whose true goals he cannot decipher, seeking information about a rocket that he cannot find, he becomes trapped—as he wanders across Germany and joins the Nazi fugitives aboard the "Anubis"—in a cruel network of sensuous moments he cannot transcend. And gradually, as his fears and frustration mount, he begins to

think more and more in terms of escape—whether in sex, or drugs, or simple flight across the surface of a war-torn Europe.

This "derangement of aim" has terrible ethical consequences. As Slothrop becomes sexually entangled first with Greta Erdmann and then with her daughter, Bianca, his spirit begins to darken. Drawn by Greta into her sadomasochistic games, he discovers that "Whatever it is with her, he's catching it. Out in the ruins he sees darkness now at the edges of all the broken shapes, *showing from behind them.* Light nests in Margherita's hair like black doves. He will look at his chalk hands, and along the borders of each finger, darkness will gutter and leap" (446).

This darkness deepens as he joins the Fascist refugees on the *Anubis* and takes Greta's adolescent daughter for a lover. In Bianca's presence he experiences a brief moment of escape from his terrific self-absorption—"Right here, right now . . . she *exists*. . . . For Slothrop this is some discovery" (470). But it passes, and Slothrop compounds the wrong he has already done to "a child" (470) by abandoning her to the "screaming Fascist cargo" (491) aboard the *Anubis.* He "is growing less anxious about betraying those who trust him," the narrator explains: "He feels obligations less immediately. There is, in fact, a general loss of emotion, a numbness" (490–91). "For this," the narrator declares, "he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost" (470). We have "no good reason to hope for any turn, any surprise *I-see-it*, not from Slothrop" (509).

Thus does Slothrop, in his godless derangement of aims, descend to committing one of the few sins that the New Testament marks as unforgivable, a crime against a child. Such a crime would seem, by any accounting, to confirm his "Preterition" (509): to mark him for damnation. But Pynchon works both within and against the force field of Calvinism, which envisions grace abounding, as Bunyan puts it, to the chief of sinners. It should not be terribly surprising, then, that although we have "no good reason to hope for any turn" in Slothrop, any rectification of aims and redemption of the darkened spirit, such a turn occurs. Abandoning the *Anubis*, Slothrop joins the "great frontierless streaming" (549) of displaced persons across Europe and begins, in a thoroughly unstructured and even unintentional way, to dedicate himself to what might be called practices of communion. We find him opening himself to unforeseen encounters through a familiar Pynchonian pedagogy of undirected drifting, sharing what he has with others, watching their faces intently, dreaming, and "sit-

ting very quietly" (552) with nonhuman beings, animals and trees. These culturally undervalued but readily available exercises enable him to lose some of the numbness that has sapped his spirit and to participate in a range of empathetic encounters. He gets in touch with strangers in all their intensely human presence, with animals and trees, and with the dead, who haunt his dreams and the abandoned farms where he sleeps. Perhaps he is becoming, albeit unconsciously, the sort of spiritual seeker who "makes it," in the words of the American Buddhist, Gary Snyder, "by poverty, wandering, and simple-minded, self-sufficient detachment" ("Japan" 28).

Slothrop's spiritual transformation culminates in a period of hermetic retreat. Living alone in the mountains like an Orphic magus, a Buddhist monk, or a Franciscan, Slothrop "likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountain" (623). "He's been changing," the narrator tells us, "plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious" (623). He's found his Orphic harp again. And he's "closer to being a spiritual medium than he's been yet" (622).

This reciprocal process of self-dismantling and communion with others has important political implications. For, *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests, the "self" is little more than the role assigned to the individual by the rulers of the society in which he or she lives: "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit" (712–13). When Slothrop plucks at the albatross of self, then, he not only opens himself to communion with all beings; he also opens himself to more manifestly subversive forms of active caring. Trees instruct him in the arts of eco-sabotage (553). For a village's annual festival, he dons the costume of "Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero . . . who routed a Viking invasion" and does his best to protect them against a real invasion of cops (567). And in his most significant intervention, he brings the Hereros news of a planned attack by genocidal American forces. "[W]hy is he out here, doing this?" Slothrop wonders. "[W]hen he was supposed to be . . . a hardboiled private eye . . . planning soberly now, weighing your options, determining your goals" (561). With his old, individualistic and analytical identity falling away in the face of feelings and forces he only half understands, Slothrop goes over not only to the "black devils" (560) but to prayer: "Let me be able to warn them in time" (562). Glimpsing new "vistas of thought,"

he becomes not only a political activist but a political theologian of sorts. What if, he wonders, reviving the "Slothropite heresy" of his first American ancestor, there might be a "set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up?" (556).

This is, of course, the point of departure and way of proceeding that Slothrop has stumbled into and that Pynchon would like us to consider seriously. To embrace such a path, such a style of becoming, would entail, he suggests, developing "a radically different idea of what winning and losing" mean (344). For this path is different both from the narrow way of American Calvinism and from the secular highway of Enlightenment progress. If the Calvinist itinerary entails "a solitary pilgrimage away from this world" (Hill 202) by "an individual fighting alone to save his soul, which is his and only his" (Hill 200), Slothrop's progress entails a gradual dissolving of boundaries between self and others, self and world. And if Bunyan's Christian is transformed into a spiritual warrior, a "warfaring saint" (Hill 199), Slothrop becomes, as we have seen, a holy fool and a Franciscan icon of identification with all beings. Finally, if Christian attains access to the City of God that lies across the River of Death, Slothrop, in the most optimistic version of his ending, is scattered across the Earth he loves and is reborn in a new generation of heretics. (Pynchon is creating here, I'd argue, a foundation myth for the sixties.)

But Slothrop's way breaks as radically with Enlightenment notions of progress as it does with Calvinist. Pynchon thematizes this break in an extraordinary passage that comes just before his depiction of Slothrop's transfiguration. Two characters are arguing over different musical traditions. One, a contemporary composer, rants in the register of a certain avant-gardism against the other's love of tonality: "Tonality is a game," he insists. "You'll never move beyond the game, to the Row. The Row is enlightenment." "The Row is a game too," his adversary insists. "I'm choosing *my* game, one full of light and kindness. You're stuck with that stratosphere stuff and rationalize its dullness away by calling it 'enlightenment.' You don't know what enlightenment is, Kerl, you're blinder than I am" (621–22). What Pynchon gives us here is nothing less than a postmodern, antifoundationalist defense of the very kind of postmodernism I am trying to bring into focus, the kind that uses arguments against secure foundations and totalizations to break with prestigious secular traditions

of metaphysical absolutism, skeptical rationalism, and existential nihilism. But the passage serves as well as a gloss on the scenes that surround it, in which Slothrop, half-consciously and sometimes halfheartedly, chooses a spiritually inflected game "full of light and kindness" that produces a kind of "enlightenment," taking the word now in its ancient religious sense, dramatically at odds with the Enlightenment he once obeyed through the practices of analysis and unmasking.

Of course the whole postsecular narrative of Slothrop's Progress is fraught with more ambiguities and uncertainties than I have acknowledged so far. Indeed, if Michael Bérubé is correct, the issue of "Slothrop's ending" is "the single most hotly debated issue in Pynchon criticism" (249). Some critics have argued that Slothrop's ignorance (he is "instructed, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper than he can explain" [626]) disqualifies him as a figure of any spiritual dignity. I'd argue, on the contrary, that Slothrop is one of Charles Taylor's "beginners" or a neomonastic of the sort described by Alasdair MacIntyre, a refugee from the imperium who often does not know what he is doing. Through him, in other words, Pynchon is trying precisely to imagine the sort of redemptive path that might open before a soul as ignorant of spiritual matters as many people in the modern West and wanting to suggest that some sort of redemption is still available to such beings.

But the novel itself contains a much stronger challenge to any redemptive reading. For Pynchon refuses to give us an authoritative account of Slothrop's final period. Instead, he offers two sharply divergent accounts (the darker, more secular one is based in part on the narrator's reading of Slothrop's Tarot!). In the first account, Slothrop acquires the precious invisibility accorded by Pynchon to some of his favorite characters and communities, and the traces of his passing locate him only as "a friend" (742) whose final "scattering" suggests Christian and pagan ideas of sacrificial self-emptying and redemptive rebirth. (Walt Whitman, Kenneth Burke notes, anticipated "James' pluralism by the vision of himself 'disintegrated,' ecstatically asserting 'I will scatter myself among men and women as I go' " [14]). But in the second account, Slothrop, dogged perhaps by his burden of crimes and his lack of full insight and trapped in a cosmos without hope, simply fades into the gray immensity of annihilation. The stark uncertainty of this double ending, its simultaneous affirmation and denial of spiritual possibility, is a sign of the powerful agnosticism of Pynchon's postsecu-

lar imagination, which can imagine, but not decisively affirm, a path that would lead out of secular wastelands into a more friendly universe. Perhaps Pynchon enrolls himself, here, in the company of those philosophers described by Derrida who are interested in the religious but most comfortable (or least uncomfortable) imagining the possibility of the redemptive event without affirming the event itself.

Varieties of Preterite Spirituality: *Vineland*

Published seventeen years after *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* (1990) resembles the earlier work in a number of ways. Once again Pynchon depicts a radically pluralistic, exuberantly reenchanted universe, one in which nature spirits abound, trees talk, kids learn to make psychic voyages to the South American rain forests, and ninjas master the tactics of invisibility. In this universe, Tsorrek, a Native American underworld, receives some of the dead, but others (the Thanatoids) seem bound in a limbo-like Bardo state identified with the reincarnation cycles of Tibetan Buddhism. Similarly, if something like Buddhism's karma seems to be at work in the life of human beings, various forms of demonic possession and haunting, identified with traditions of the occult, also seem to shape human destiny.

The two novels share common narrative elements as well as a common ontological structure. DL Chastain and Zoyd Wheeler, two children of America's vast working class, grow up in secular zones of the culture and gradually become more spiritual in dramatically unconventional ways. And the political preoccupations and judgments of the two works are in important respects consistent. Pynchon once again represents social reality as dominated by ruthless and ubiquitous antidemocratic forces. His official America, like the America James described before him, is an imperial power bent on controlling the world and crushing opposition at home: "it's the whole Reagan program," one character remarks—"dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War Two, restore fascism at home and around the world" (265). The community of political refugees that forms in Vineland in the wake of the defeats of the sixties resembles the community glimpsed at an earlier moment in California's history in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where Oedipa discovers a counterculture of people who have made "a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its

machinery" into a "separate, silent, unsuspected world" (124–25). It resembles as well the informal anarchist communities of the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*. And its aging hippies are older versions of Slothrop's "children," the kazoo-playing Los Angeles anarchists of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Here once again, then, Pynchon is exploring the survival strategy of retreat and muted resistance so often foregrounded in his fiction.

But in *Vineland*, in contrast to *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon emphasizes the role of spirituality in forging sustainable communities of survival and resistance. He depicts and endorses an array of preteritie spiritualities—spiritualities addressed to and persevering within the communities of the unprivileged and oppressed. And he shifts his emphasis, within his treatment of the spiritual, from improvisatory and ecstatic forms of experience to more disciplined and unspectacular practices. As we shall see, both the challenge *Vineland* takes up, that of discovering sources of living spirituality in the commercialized zones of contemporary society, and the challenge it throws down, that of understanding discipline as a potentially positive mode of being, also shape the work of DeLillo, Morrison, Erdrich, and a host of other writers.

Pynchon's vision of what humanity is up against at this point in history closely resembles Fredric Jameson's. Jameson argues, in his famous essay on postmodernity, that the postmodern moment is one in which corporate interests with the help of government and the new electronic technologies finally complete their colonization of nature and the mind. Pynchon, too, worries that globalizing capitalism is "penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconsciousness) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedian footholds for critical effectivity" (Jameson 49). Thus the town of Vineland, itself one such enclave, is in the course of the novel colonized by Hollywood production companies, television cable companies, and real estate developers. But for Pynchon, unlike Jameson, effective resistance to these encroaching forces depends as much on the nurturing of spiritual perspectives and practices as on secular forms of political analysis and intervention. In his answers to the question of what is to be done, then, then, Pynchon stands in greater proximity to West Coast radicals such as Gary Snyder, Starhawk, and Joanna Macy than he does to a Western Marxist such as Jameson. He shares with these figures the postsecular sense that spiritual resources, as well as rational ones, will be needed to check the onslaught of capitalist institutions, technologies, and ideas.

And he advances in *Vineland* a claim that Snyder makes more directly in "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution." "The practice of meditation," Snyder writes, "wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities" (178). Pynchon, Snyder, and Jameson see a similar danger, then, but Snyder and Pynchon recommend a spiritually inflected response.

Not that the response they recommend, or the terms in which they recommend it, are identical. For while Snyder's dramatically spare, Zen-influenced poetry focuses on and celebrates life in the wilderness and in rural enclaves of retreat and resistance, Pynchon's *Vineland* not only renders the larger world of contemporary capitalist culture, but it also sings its tunes, invokes its sacred texts, and goes looking within it for sources of resistance. The novel's action moves up and down the length of California, exploring both the sixties-sponsored northern countercultural zone of rural collectives, anarchism, and alternative spiritualities, and the Southern California culture of corporate power, market values, media saturation, and commercialized, demotic spiritualities. And the redwood forests that repeat with a difference the German hills where Slothrop is transformed are not the only source of spiritual instruction (and aesthetic inspiration) it discovers. Pynchon's postmodern pluralism and his concern for the preterite citizens of consumer society take him, in other words, where Snyder will not go, and he finds there not only the forms of folly that appall Snyder but also sources of hope that Snyder does not recognize. Much as the postmodern architectural theorist Robert Venturi instructs architects to relax their demands for purity and "learn from Las Vegas," so Pynchon instructs his spiritually inclined readers to stop focusing exclusively on "pure zones" such as Vineland, which is in any event destined for development, and to learn from Los Angeles.

Pynchon delivers this invitation through his working-class heroine, DL Chastain. DL likes spending time in Vineland, but when she first comes there she is already a committed Buddhist. She has learned her faith not in some remote and exquisite zendo but from "sleazy" teachers in the slums of Tokyo and the strip-mall dojos of the American Southwest, and she has found a spiritual home at a commercialized New Age retreat center. Tracing DL's itinerary, and that of her double, Frenesi Gates, enables Pynchon to dramatize the spiritual aridity of mass secular culture and to ridicule aspects

of New Age alternatives. But it also enables him to clarify, for the reader, the very limited spiritual options open to America's secular underclass and to make a case for a popular spiritual tradition (the Buddhist martial arts) that educated opinion regularly writes off. In this respect too, then, Pynchon's cosmos extends beyond that of the conventional religious imagination, accommodating "preterite" traditions disallowed by their otherness (Buddhism), moral ambiguity (the martial arts), and manifest commercialization.

One can read *Vineland* as the story of DL's Progress, the perilous and halting passage of a working-class military dependent toward a certain degree of redemptive spiritual knowledge. Pynchon's desire to chart an accessible working-class route toward useful spiritual knowledge is evident here. Ninjitsu, the martial arts tradition DL practices, actually emerged, if the legends and scanty historical record can be trusted, among the poor peasantry of medieval Japan. It was from its start unaristocratic, impure, and opportunistic, employed both to resist the feudal lords and to win a place in their service. And it has become, by the time that DL encounters it, positively shady: DL's teacher, Inoshiro Sensei, smokes, drinks, makes improper advances, and works for the Tokyo mob. Pynchon, in a characteristically powerful gesture, asks us both to recognize the criminal impurity of this tradition and to honor it, to understand that socially marginalized and spiritually disenfranchized humans will try to find their spiritual footing, and whatever power they can wring from it, in ways that will appear, even to them, as pitifully inadequate. So Inoshiro explains to a disappointed DL that his art is not for spiritual (and social) aristocrats but "for the rest of us down here. . . . Because we have ancestors and descendants too—our generations . . . our traditions" (127). And so DL, who at first wishes she had found her way into the noble world of the exalted traditions, discovers that her practice, as compromised as it is, has been of great value. "In the traditional stories," the narrator explains, "the apprenticeship is hard and long, someplace scenic up in the mountains where the student is put to work at menial outdoor tasks, learning patience and obedience, without which she can learn nothing else. . . . What DL got from Inoshiro Sensei was more like the modernized crash course" (123). But the "sensei, for all his lechery, high-speed frenzies, temperamental snits and low-tolerance ways," becomes a "refuge" for DL (125), and his instruction steers her "away from

the powerlessness and the sooner or later self-poisoning hatred that had been waiting for her" (121) in her family, the world of the military base, and her classed and gendered future.

Vineland's argument for the martial arts traditions that took root in working-class America in the sixties and seventies is many-faceted and politically provocative. These traditions, Pynchon suggests in passages such as those cited above, provide a way out, psychologically, for working-class kids sentenced by social position to powerlessness and self-hatred. There is nothing utopian about this way, nothing dramatically transcendental about the lift it provides. But it does enable individuals otherwise condemned to powerlessness and bitterness to acquire a kind of strength. And it helps them, as well, to take some distance from the discourses, directives, and distractions of the culture. So DL finds herself, in her practice, "entering into a system of heresies about the human body[,] . . . returning to herself, reclaiming her body." Which " 'they always like to brainwash you about,' " she explains, " 'like they know it better, trying to keep you as spaced away from it as they can. Maybe they think people are easier to control that way' " (128). In a similar fashion, she uses meditation and the physical exercises, over years, to check her inclination to act impulsively, an inclination that, Pynchon suggests, is deliberately reinforced by her culture's values and the "character" it has assigned her.

When after her years with Inoshiro Sensei in Japan, DL returns to the States, it is only to hook up with another highly compromised source of spiritual instruction, this time one identified with the Kunoichi Attentives, an order of female Ninjas who have appropriated an old nunnery and learned the ways of New Age commercialism. Looking "for some cash flow," they offer "fantasy marathons for devotees of the Orient, group rates on Kiddie Ninja Weekends, help for rejected disciples of Zen" (107). But the fact of impurity, which is frequently used both by secularists and by mainstream believers as a means of disqualifying popular spiritual movements, is rendered in *Vineland* as simply one aspect of an authentically instructive tradition. The Attentives teach DL how to think back against the assumptions of the consumer culture they partly embrace. " 'Only the first of many kunoichi disillusionments,' " Sister Rochelle explains, " 'is finding that the knowledge won't come down all at once in any big transcendent moment. . . . Well you ought to see how many gaga little twits we get up here . . . looking for secret powers on the cheap . . . like we'll

keep 'em awake all weekend, maybe around dawn on Sunday they'll start hallucinating, have a mental adventure they can mistake for improvement in their life' " (112).

Against the culture's invitation to perpetual distraction, the Sisterhood offers instruction in focused attention. Against its identification of freedom with the immediate gratification of desires, they teach a form of freedom founded on self-reflection and responsibility. And against its image of the individual self as the standard of all values, they teach a self whose vocation it is to overcome the illusion of its own isolate identity. "All souls," the esoteric Buddhism of the ninjas holds, "human and otherwise, were different disguises of the same greater being—God at play" (121). Finally, against the culture's promises of sudden and radical transformation, they teach patient struggle and limited achievement.

From the Kunoichi Attentives, then, DL receives the tools that keep her from succumbing, as most of her generation do, to the system that is foreclosing on the nation's democratic experiment. In *Vineland*'s rendering of the sixties, the radicals' dreams of freedom, their understanding of the world, and their dreams of revolution are all formed, or deformed, in the crucible of capitalist America. This contamination dooms the movement to defeat. For all the rhetoric of resistance and liberation, Pynchon suggests, the mass movement is in the end a manifestation of a "great childward surge" (283) on the part of a thoroughly conditioned generation whose only need is "to stay children forever" (269). Or rather, most of it is. "[Y]ou've been out there on the line," Federal Agent Brock Vond explains to a junior colleague, "seen these kids up close—some of 'em's in it for real, all right, and they're tough cookies, long hair and all. Never turn 'em. . . . They'll get remanded someplace else—we always knew what to do with them. I'm counting that other 90%, amateurs, consumers, short attention spans, out there for the thrills" (270).

Pynchon parses this distinction between a minority committed to change and struggle and a thoroughly compromised majority through a number of contrastive pairings, the most sustained of which is his contrast between DL and her radical partner, Frenesi Gates. Frenesi, the second "woman warrior" in *Vineland*, not only abandons the movement to which DL remains true, she betrays it, informing on her fellow student radicals and arranging to have a radical leader assassinated. At the same time, she uses the language of liberation to justify deserting her husband and child.

Frenesi, Pynchon suggests, lacks just the qualities of heart and mind that DL learns in her preterite spiritual community. She thinks only of herself; she loves glamour; she has no patience; and she imagines time—the time of her life—as an empty duration that she is free to fill as she wishes. When DL suggests that radical activity " 'don't mean much unless I make what they call the correct analysis,' " Frenesi responds, " 'Maybe I don't have the patience, I have to trust the way this makes me feel. Feels right, DL. Like we're really going to change the world this time' " (118). And when DL, a star in the small world of the martial arts, confesses her desire for a more ordinary, anonymous life, Frenesi is baffled by her readiness to relinquish the putative privileges of the superhero. She reminds DL that "Superman never has to get involved" in the banalities and tragedies of ordinary life, asks why "anybody [would] want to be only mortal," and concludes, "Better to stay an angel, angel" (134). This same dream of exemption from the quotidian and the mortal, culled from Hollywood wisdom texts such as "Superman" and "Charlie's Angels," governs Frenesi's choice of a postsixties life-path. So when she is offered the chance to become a licensed assassin for the State, she immediately identifies this path with "the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future" (71).

DL is wiser. Buddhism has taught her to believe that the privileged temporality Frenesi thinks she has entered, "game time" (293), is not the fault-free zone it is reputed to be, in the propaganda of an "anything goes" capitalist and consumer culture. Offered a similar opportunity to kill with impunity, she refuses, concluding that the act of murder will produce "consequences," "the workings of karma" (132). In its wake, "there was no question that she'd ever be free" (132).

DL's wisdom, here and elsewhere in the novel, is represented as grounded in her spiritual practice. She is as much a product of her culture as Frenesi, and subject to the same socially conditioned impulses, but her education enables her, gradually and imperfectly, to see through some of its mystifications and to uproot some of the habits it instills in its subjects. DL's greatest error is to capitulate, eventually, to her desire to revenge herself on Brock Vond. But when she mistakenly wounds Takeshi Fumimoto instead of Vond, she immediately seeks to help him recover. Sister Rochelle's diagnosis of her student's shortcomings is brutally clear: " 'no continuity, no persistence, no . . . fucking . . . attention' " (155). " 'You were brought—down

again into the corrupted world,' " she declares, " 'and instead of paying attention, taking the time, getting prepared, you had to be a reckless bitch and go rushing through the outward forms, so of course you blew it' " (154). As "penance" and instruction, Sister Rochelle commands DL to become Takeshi's " 'devoted . . . sidekick and to try to balance your karmic account by working off the great wrong you have done him' " (163). Over time this discipline frees her of her own vengeful fixation on past wrongs. "Had it only been," she wonders, "that many years of what the Buddha calls 'passion, enmity, folly'? Suppose that she'd been meant, all the time, to be paying attention to something else entirely?" (380). The "something else," in this novel of life in the middle reaches of the spiritual, is not "enlightenment" or even her soul, but Takeshi himself, a partner and friend whom DL learns to love. By awakening to his existence, DL passes through the third obstacle to her development. She has already escaped from the trap of class and gender that were her birthright and from the spells of distraction, stardom, and violence cast by the agents of consumerism and entertainment culture. Now she overcomes the equally powerful spell of resentment that traps her cohorts, after the sixties, in a posture of painful fixation on the past.

This spell finds its most dramatic expression, of course, in the fate of the Thanatoids, deceased veterans of the sixties who cannot even proceed "further into the condition of death" because they are held back by "resentment" and "their needs for revenge" (171). These are the people Takeshi and DL serve in their "Karmic Adjustment" business, one more example of a commercially contaminated spiritual enterprise that still produces results. In operating this business, Takeshi and DL themselves become compromised saints of a sort: a contemporary Buddhist scholar describes the role of the bodhisattva, the ideal human of Mahayanan Buddhism, as "helping individuals change their karmic legacies and patterns" (Soeng 53). And DL qualifies as a kind of radical saint as well. Her "saintlike control" makes her "the steady-beating heart of the collective": she "could never have made the deal with Brock that Frenesi had" (260).

Movements of resistance, Pynchon seems to be suggesting, would do well to draw on the preterite spiritualities that encourage the kind of disciplined inner work that shapes DL. Still, Pynchon's pluralism prevents him from representing any single school of spiritual formation as an exclusive source of possibility. In *Vineland* he celebrates, in addition to the

Buddhist-inflected schools of the martial arts, the less dramatically disciplined (and less violent) paths of Zoyd, his daughter Prairie, and the entire Traverse-Becker clan. Prairie and her cohort of refugees grow up in the woods and seem to gather, there, certain powers of transspecies communication and voyaging. They represent, perhaps, one branch of the next generation of noncollaborators. Meanwhile, the Traverse-Becker clan carries on, in suitably impure and anarchist fashion, the twin traditions of Wobbly anarchism and transcendentalist resistance. Each year at the clan reunion or retreat, their patriarch reads a passage by Emerson he discovered in a "jailhouse copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James." " 'Secret retributions,' " Jesse reads, " 'are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar' " (369). By citing this passage in which the discourses of faith and progressive politics are so emphatically combined, Pynchon reminds us of and inscribes himself within a long-standing American radical tradition. Emerson draws in this passage on a vision of an ethicalized cosmos that he may well have encountered in his readings of Eastern philosophy; James, the anti-imperialist and religious pluralist, draws on Emerson; and Jesse, an anonymous, imprisoned member of the great anarchist union, the Industrial Workers of the World, draws on both to stave off bitterness and despair. Pynchon himself, celebrating the text, takes his place in the line of resistance, which runs on, I would propose, to the ecospiritual and anarchistic activists of Seattle. Significantly, as David Cowart points out, the Emerson citation is the only explicit literary reference in a novel saturated with explicit references to popular culture and it "is presented seriously" rather than "comically undercut" ("Attenuated" 6–7).

Jesse's affirmation is stirring stuff, yet it is in Pynchon's portrait of Zoyd Wheeler that we find, perhaps, *Vineland*'s most subtle portrait of a preterite spirituality. Zoyd, like Slothrop before him, is a drifter and dolt and has no visible beliefs, no profound spiritual convictions. And his life is, by most standards, a mess: he does dope, works pickup jobs in the Vineland region, cries in his beer over his lost love Frenesi, and lets his daughter get her own breakfast. We need to rummage around in the waste of his curriculum vitae, then, to discover anything redeeming. But Pynchon encourages us to pursue just such investigations. Zoyd has been a loving father and he has

delivered his daughter from the grim world of Southern California, raising her among redwoods in a community where people care for each other in an unstructured, imperfect, but authentic fashion. She is a good kid and more, and he is a good father.

Yet we are likely to recognize this, if we recognize it at all, only toward the end of *Vineland*, as Pynchon sets Zoyd two important tests of character. When Frenesi returns, Zoyd, who has mourned and resented her for years, does not waste his time pursuing or berating her but instead befriends her partner Flash, in an act of impressive generosity: Zoyd, seeing Flash's baffled love for Frenesi, "knew he'd have to be the comforter in this, with the years of her absence to insulate and protect him after all" (372). This act of self-forgetfulness constitutes, within the frame of a novel very much interested in the ethics and pragmatics of forgiveness and letting go, a signal success. But Zoyd passes a second and more difficult test as well. One of the most often cited passages in contemporary Buddhist literature is the Buddha's cry of triumph when he finally discerns that part of himself forever seeking to build a permanent abode in the transient world: "Oh housebuilder!" he cries, "You have now been seen. / You shall build the house no longer. / All your rafters have been broken . . . / Achieved is the end of craving" (Goldstein 83). The point of this passage from the *Dhammapada* is that the impulse to grasp and cling puts one at odds with a fundamental ontological principle: things are impermanent, transitory, mutable. Out of this impulse and its inevitable frustration, Buddhism claims, grow both personal habits of greed and aggression and the great power systems that seek to achieve "total security," inevitably at the expense of other beings and communities. *Vineland*, with its focus on Zoyd's clinging to the memory of his lost wife, Prairie's clinging to the idea of her mother, DL's clinging to her betraying lover, the Thanatoids' clinging to revenge, and the State's clinging to a dream of complete control, thematizes this impulse. So Zoyd achieves an unquestionable triumph when, after a period of grief and vengeful thoughts, he gives up with grace the home that he has built with his own hands and where he has raised his daughter, although "it was like a living thing he loved" (358) and he has nowhere else to go. Parenting itself, Pynchon suggests, has been Zoyd's chief discipline and guide, and the Vineland community, human and natural, his retreat center. From the two, and out of the goodness of his own unexceptional heart, he has learned a significant lesson and earned a degree of freedom. In celebrating him,

Pynchon presses back once again against the elitism of spiritual traditions and narratives. And he takes his stand alongside of Snyder, who has argued that the discipline of "work, family, loss, love and failure" (Barnhill 206) is itself a spiritual path.

That Pynchon himself is practiced in the art of "letting go" is evident in his treatment of Vineland, the "Harbor of Refuge" (316) that is the privileged place of the novel that bears its name. Vineland is of course both an America of the imagination, unspoiled by European settlement, and a last refuge of sorts from the kind of colonization that has turned America into a wired world. Or so it is, when the refuges of the sixties first "discover" it. But by 1984, the novel's ominous present, all this has changed. It turns out that "Idealistic flower children looking to live in harmony with the Earth were not the only folks with their eyes on Vineland. Developers in and out of state had also discovered this shoreline in the way of the wind, with its concealed tranquillities. . . . All born to be suburbs, in their opinion" (319). So it is that when the new homes rise and the cable companies move in, "eager to claim souls for their distant principals" (319), "former artists or spiritual pilgrims" (321) like Zoyd go to work for them. "[T]here's no way," Gary Snyder told a guilt-ridden hippy roofer, back in 1976, "that any of us can keep ourselves pure. We just have to keep as clear a head as possible and steer away from the worst of it" (*The Real Work* 88). This is Pynchon's wisdom, too, and like Snyder he offers Buddhist practice as a means of clearing the head for the difficult task of resisting and negotiating unwanted change.

Vineland, then, is at once a political novel and a novel of spiritual formation. In it, Pynchon suggests that in the context of a global consumer capitalism that reaches into the mind to shape expectations and desires and disciplines those who refuse the dreams it has implanted, only something as powerfully transformative as a spiritual discipline can enable individuals to reclaim some mental autonomy and resist the psychological and physical coercions of the market. Political necessity demands what ontological openings make possible, a rethinking of the world, and of the human project, in terms of ancient spiritual precepts and practices. DL is not a fundamentalist, nor is Pynchon: both affirm forms of practice that acknowledge the fallibility of doctrine, the legitimacy of other paths, and the inevitability of spiritual impurity. And both are absolutely opposed to the path of violent coercion taken by some within the fundamentalist

camp. But in her work and his argument we can glimpse something of the logic that seems to fuel certain fundamentalisms, the notion that only a deep transformation of character can prepare individuals and communities today to resist the profound penetration of corporatist technologies of control.

Art and Argument

In attempting both to convey the scale and complexity of a radically plural cosmos and to recall our attention to this Earth, this life, this moment, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* dispatch the reader's imagination, more or less simultaneously, in opposite directions. They call on us, through their ontological innovations, to "think big" about the complexity and scale of the cosmos and to follow the trajectories of traditional narratives of transcendence. But at the same time, they recall us, at the level of narrative, to our mortal and embodied being, encourage us to pay close attention to local temporalities, joys, and obligations. The expansive itinerary of the first project produces effects of such dazzling originality that it is easy to overlook the second. Yet the combination of the two produces a complex mode of seeing that characterizes many ethically serious forms of religiosity. On the political front, as well, one finds analogous complexities: "Think globally, act locally" remains a progressive slogan.

The tension between exuberant proliferation and deliberate simplification, vertiginous voyaging and an ethical attention to the local, takes its place in Pynchon's work alongside of a second and even more striking tension between verbal texture and dramatic argument. Pynchon's style is notoriously polyphonic and prolix, his exuberant sampling of registers headlong, vertiginous. The texture and tempo of his fiction seem, in fact, to mimic both the speedy, overpacked, distracting tempo of contemporary existence and the style of contemporary electronic media, which, as Pynchon puts it, "give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, . . . claim our attention" (*Vineland* 314). But if we look beyond the stylistic pressures of the work to the arguments implicit in the stories it relates, we find Pynchon repeatedly questioning precisely such aesthetic styles and the hectic, supersaturated modes of being they sponsor. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, the narrator invites us in one crucial scene to

"leave Their electric voices"—the voices of deliberate distraction—behind "at the edge of . . . town" (720) and to seek insight in the silence of a country night. And in *Vineland*, the grim underworld into which Brock Vond descends mimics the sonic texture of the electronically amplified culture above it. As he approaches, Brock hears, "the sound of the river, echoing, harsh, ceaseless, and beyond it the drumming, the voices, not chanting together but remembering, speculating, arguing, telling tales, uttering curses, singing songs, all the things voices do, but without ever allowing the briefest breath of silence. All these voices, forever" (379).

Pynchon here anticipates Kenneth Gergen's indictment of a postmodern culture of "saturation" (71). In the media world of electric voices and in Pynchon's version of hell alike there is too much noise; all harmony (the chanting) and stillness (the breath of silence) have been eliminated and with them certain sources of strength, certain possibilities for subversive listening and hearing. At other moments, of course, contemporary forms of polyphony will be rendered in ways that make them attractive, enjoyable, and that mark them as a source of resistance. But whatever the valance, the tension remains: Pynchon's work simultaneously inscribes us in and warns us against the temporal and spatial dynamics of mainstream postmodernity. And if it suggests, at certain moments, that these dynamics can be turned against postmodern power, at other moments it suggests that immanent forms of resistance will not succeed and looks to the religious for strategies—retreat, meditation, "chanting together"—to resist the postmodern barrage of words, images, and sensations.

Viewed from this angle, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* seem designed to conduct their privileged characters to a space beyond the cultural site and psychological sources of their own production, that saturated space of external and internal heterogeneity without a norm, and to recommend a religiously inflected strategy of resistance to the discursive cacophony that the novels simultaneously emulate and repudiate. But at one level, of course, this dream of delivery is quite impossible: the characters "live" only within the confines of the text's wild and unresolved polyvocality. This polyvocality is a feature, it should be noted, even of the communities into which they are delivered: the refugee zones and kazoo collective of *Gravity's Rainbow* and the clan reunion of *Vineland*. In the end, perhaps, Pynchon, like the Mahayanan Buddhists he appears to have studied, understands silence and speech, the singular and the plural, as complementary aspects of

existence and seeks not to privilege one or the other but to balance them out. He writes back, in other words, not only against the dream of the one implicit in totalizing ideologies but also against the idealization of untutored immersion in cacophonous "differences" and the new.

Conclusions

At the end of "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber says a few searingly dismissive words about certain Western efforts at reenchantment. Many "modern intellectuals," he writes, apparently feel the need to "furnish their souls with . . . guaranteed genuine antiques." These antique hunters eventually "remember that religion has belonged among such antiques, and of all things religion is what they do not possess." So, "by way of substitute . . . they play at decorating a sort of domestic chapel with small sacred images from all over the world, or they produce surrogates through all sorts of psychic experiences to which they ascribe the dignity of mystic holiness" (154). "Never," Weber concludes, has a "new prophecy of any power emerged from such play." The acuity of Weber's indictment is unquestionable; it haunts my readings here. Are these contemporary novels—with their appeal to exotic forms of spirituality and "all sorts of psychic experience"—only sterile exercises in privileged nostalgia? Is Pynchon's ontological pluralism nothing more than a sophisticated form of collecting, a version of the appetite that draws fashionable New Yorkers into shops crammed with Tibetan bells, Nepalese prayer flags, puppets from Bali, icons from Mexico? It may turn out that these works do belong beside the bells and prayer flags and icons by which Weber's intellectuals decorate their studies.

But it should be noted both that Weber leaves room for more authentic movements of the spirit ("within the smallest and most intimate circles . . . something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*" ["Science" 155, emphasis in the original]) and that Pynchon himself obliquely addresses Weber's charges. Thus Pynchon's "modern intellectual," Roger Mexico, and his girlfriend, Jessica, are compelled in *Gravity's Rainbow* to enter an Anglican church during an Advent service by impulses that include "nostalgia" (128) and the hope of simple refreshment. "Come then," an unidentified voice beckons, "Leave your war awhile, paper or iron war,

petrol or flesh, come in with your love, your fear of losing, your exhaustion with it" (134). But once inside the chapel, Roger and his lover find themselves facing something more powerful and complex than they had bargained for. Jessica isn't sure, remembering the caroling children of her childhood, that "her heart [is] ready to take on quite all the stresses of her mortality and theirs" (128). Both she and Roger are surprised to discover that the main singer, a black Jamaican, is leading the choir of English soldiers in a German hymn. And the message of the service shocks them too: "what do you think, it's a children's story? There aren't any. The children are away dreaming . . . and it's Adults Only in here tonight" (135). The priest is full of doubts, not only about the world but also about the Advent story itself: "what kind of world is it . . . for a baby to come . . . thinkin' he's gonna redeem it, why, he oughta have his head examined" (135). And as for the choir, they offer "no counterfeit baby, no announcement of the Kingdom, not even a try at warming or lighting this terrible night, only . . . our maximum reach outward—*praise be to God*!" (136).

Jessica and Roger may be drawn to this chapel—like Weber's intellectual—by the desire to decorate their lives with antique experiences and emotions. But what they experience, once inside, is something larger, rougher, less domestic, and much more troubling than they had expected. Yet the experience holds and even helps them. Roger, Jessica notices, isn't "looking nihilistic, not even cheaply so" (129), and everyone, the narrator implies, enjoys a certain temporary respite from the identities they have been assigned by "the Caesars" (136). Pynchon's rewriting of Weber's scornful story suggests that even the most whimsical and aestheticized turning can produce unintended effects, when those who turn encounter, within the orbit of spirituality, not childhood's soothing stories but the complex and yet profound articulation of adult questions and intuitions. This postsecular form of spirituality is there to be encountered when the reader enters Pynchon's world and attends to the stories he tells.

We wanted the touch of the real in the way
that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of
the transcendent.
—Stephen Greenblatt,
Practicing New Historicism

2 Worldly Vocations
Don DeLillo

"When the Old God leaves the world," a character asks in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, "what happens to all the unexpended faith?" (7). One strand of secularization theory assumes that religious emotions, impulses, and modes of thought simply disappear when God does and that what follows is a rational order free of the religious. Another strand of thought (the two are intertwined in the groundbreaking work of Max Weber) implies that these emotions, impulses, and modes survive to shape and betray the cultures of reason, condemning secular thought to recapitulate the idolatries of religious thought and secular cultures to fight their own religious wars. Don DeLillo speaks the language of survival. The old gods thrive, mostly in virulent forms, at the margins of the global capitalist system he so brilliantly maps, in foreign and domestic zones of misery populated variously by Islamic militants, ecstatic Hindu pilgrims, Moonies, and Pente-

costals. But religious ways of seeing and being survive as well at its ostensibly secular core, shaping consciousness and conduct among brokers, businessmen, and professors.

Or rather, what survives to determine individuals' relations to political authority, the market, the technological ensemble, the environment, and themselves is a constellation of ancient fears, hopes, and recipes for survival long associated with the religious: fear of death and hope of immortality, fear of weakness and hope for protection, fear of chaos and hope for benignant order, fear of ignorance and hope for total, unimpeachable knowledge. These fears drive not only DeLillo's religious zealots but also the cadres of corporate managers, security agents, and spies that protect the global imperium. This is why characters who have no discernable religious affiliations or beliefs are regularly described as "monks," "mystics," "ascetics," and "adepts" in DeLillo's fiction. In one form or another, then, the most dangerous aspects of religion—its promises of ultimate security, its insistence on absolute authority, its repudiation of dialogue and difference—threaten human efforts to build a more peaceful, equitable world.

DeLillo's fiction relentlessly exposes the religious and quasi-religious roots of our contemporary woes. But DeLillo also suggests, in work after work, that the only proper way of addressing these woes will likewise be religious. Like Charles Taylor and others, he does so in part on the grounds that people are drawn to the religious not just because of "the terror in [their] souls" (*The Names* 308) but because a compelling sense of "something beyond" (*The Names* 64) draws them to specifically religious methods of assuaging their pain. "DeLillo," writes David Cowart in a study that is consistently alert to DeLillo's religious investments, "seems to construe as transcendental and even spiritually enabling the idea of presence that cannot be represented directly" (*Don* 165). We find DeLillo referring to this sense of presence with characteristic postsecular caution in two interviews. On one occasion he speaks of "a kind of radiance in dailiness" and suggests that "[s]ometimes this radiance can be . . . almost holy or sacred" (DeLillo, "Outsider" 63). On another he celebrates a set of novels that "open out into some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch [the Austrian novelist] would call it 'the word beyond speech' " (DeLillo, "Interview" 26). In both instances we can recognize a characteristic rhetoric of weakening: in the first the radiance is "almost" holy; in the second the affirmation of mystery is followed immediately by a confession of ignorance.

And so it is in DeLillo's fiction: his registration of this "something beyond" is as cautious as Pynchon's is exuberant. While Pynchon introduces a vast array of supernatural beings and domains, DeLillo resacralizes the world in the mode of modernism by subtly loosening the fabric of everyday reality so that something else—presence or emptiness—shines through and by introducing, often without any fanfare, a series of mysterious interruptions of quotidian reality. Like many modernists, he represents even these moments of possibility ambiguously, so that they may be read either as fleeting testimony to the existence of authentic mysteries or as further signs of humans' capacity for self-mystification.

Even as DeLillo partially endorses the central religious intuition of a something beyond the quotidian, however, he insists, like Vattimo and Rorty, that this intuition must be disarticulated from dreams (and institutions) of power and grandeur. And like William Connolly, he often suggests that it must be differently understood, as emanating not from some transcendental beyond but from the world itself and its inhabitants. Thus his most successful characters are converted to a certain earthliness, reconnected to a viscerally experienced, sacramentally infused world that is neither secular nor spiritual in the common sense of these terms. They do not make their way to the institutions of "structured faith" (Cowart 195) but into the realm of preterite spirituality: spontaneously convened, transient communities beyond religion's official borders. There is no hint of triumphalism in DeLillo's work, only the suggestion that a preferable way—weakened and postsecular—may be available, for some people, for some time, in a world dominated by religious and secular fundamentalisms.

As we have seen, postsecular religious innovation often takes a certain birthright religious tradition as its point of departure. Kushner writes from the "partly Jewish" position described by Harold Bloom. And DeLillo's work is informed, as Tom LeClair notes in *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, by "his early training in Catholicism" (15). The three modes of religious life that figure repeatedly in his fiction—messianic fusion and militancy, hermetic asceticism, and sacramental communion—are all proper to Catholicism. And so in a sense are the preferences that shape his assessment of these different modes. As we will see, DeLillo identifies the first two modes with strong, that is to say, violent, religiosity—with projects of mastery and power. And he celebrates the third as a weakened and responsible alternative. Yet in this, too, if Paul Giles is correct, he is true

to his Catholic tradition. For Giles claims, in his brilliant study, *American Catholic Arts and Letters*, that American Catholic writers have tended for more than a century now to privilege the more Earth-positive, sacramental versions of Catholicism over its militant and monastic strands. In the first part of this chapter, I focus on DeLillo's intricate religious and political meditations on these three modes of religious being. In the second, I turn my attention to a reading of his comic postsecular masterpiece, *White Noise*, in which he fashions a form of Earth-centered mysticism uneasily at home with the impurities of contemporary discourse and the polluted Earth. The brief final section explores the significant reassessment of ecstatic forms of popular religiosity in *Underworld*.

The Church Militant: Faith Communities and Fusion

From work to work, DeLillo's representation of organized religious activity is very much of a piece. We get a few brief glimpses of people caught up in what might be called the ordinary life of the religious, attending services, praying, discussing their faith (*The Names* 172). But most of the strong images of organized religious practice are of a different sort: they identify "worship and delirium" (*The Names* 276) around the globe—in a Pentecostal church on the American plains, at Hindu worship sites in India, in Islam's Mecca. DeLillo's unchurched characters are fascinated and upset by these manifestations of collective faith. Owen Brademas confesses that "Masses of people scare me. Religion. People driven by the same powerful emotion. All that reverence, awe and dread" (*The Names* 24). But he also wonders, "Was it a grace to be there, to lose oneself in the mortal crowd, surrendering, giving oneself over to mass awe, to disappearance in others?" (285). His question—with its representation of ecstatic collective worship as a matter of self loss, surrender, and submergence in the mass—already describes the phenomenon in a manner that makes its rejection logical, at least from the perspective of the skeptical individualists whose spiritual quests preoccupy DeLillo. And DeLillo himself goes on to equate this kind of religious behavior, as Jan Patočka, Jacques Derrida, and others have done, with totalitarian rituals of fusion and practices of terror.

Such forms of worship attract those, *Mao II* suggests, who are most desperate to escape the "soul-lonely pain" (16) of selfhood and the horror

of history. "World in pieces," thinks Karen as she waits to be married by Reverend Moon, "it is shock of shocks" (9). But flights such as Karen's are strongly criticized in many of DeLillo's novels. They constitute, he suggests, an ethically suicidal denial of the "teeming soul" of the individual, with its "nuance and shadow, grids of pinpoint singularities" and a betrayal of the mind as well, a reduction of "All things, the sum of the knowable, everything true . . . to a few simple formulas" (7). People like Karen "follow" Reverend Moon "because he gives them what they need. He answers their yearning, unburdens them of free will and independent thought" (7). The promise of an end to history that is one aspect of such mobilizations represents a betrayal of the world itself, the only available source of solace and delight, in the name of an unrealizable dream of life beyond complexity and change.

Almost nothing in *The Names*' many representations of collective worship contradicts Owen Brademas's understanding of this practice as a form of radical self-annihilation and dangerous mass mobilization. Instead, we get a series of portraits of such behavior that emphasize its irrationalism, violence, and danger. To celebrate "the Virgin's feast" on the island of Tinos, which the novel locates at the far edge of Europe, Christian "[p]ilgrims by the thousands" come "[c]rawling on hands and knees . . . in stretchers, in wheelchairs, carrying canes, blind, bandaged, crippled, diseased, muttering" (24). In Teheran, on "the tenth day of Muharram, the period of mourning and self-flagellation[,] . . . hundreds of thousands of people" march toward the "Shahyad monument, some of them wearing funeral shrouds, striking themselves with steel bars and knife blades affixed to chains" (65). In the United States, at a Pentecostal service, a "congregation of poor people" speak in tongues, "bodies rising"—their "hobbling chant, a search for melody and breath," represents an attempt "to heal a brokenness" (173). And in India, a "million people [are] waiting at Kurukshetra . . . to enter the tanks of water" (280); some of them will be trampled, we are told, while "swarming toward the tanks" (285). These images capture something of the desperation of the poor, the sick, and the excluded but reduce the inner quality of their spiritual practices to a species of dangerous delirium. The masses, *The Names* implies, have everywhere surrendered to that "fervor for fusion" (Derrida 1), which is the antithesis of responsibility.

Only rarely do characters get to speak for these crowds, to defend their practices or at least confess to some sympathy for them. In *The Names*

James Axton briefly opens another perspective on mass worship. His uncharacteristic intervention is provoked by Owen, who in a kind of Orientalist reverie, imagines what it would be like to make the pilgrimage to Mecca:

> Imagine it, to enter the city with one and a half million pilgrims, cross the border within the border, make the *hadj*. . . . To make the seven circuits of the Ka'bah. . . . The three running circuits, perhaps a hundred thousand people, a swirl of white-clad people running around the massive black cube, a whirlwind of human awe and submission. To be carried along, no gaps in the ranks, to move at a pace determined by the crowd itself, breathless, in and of them. This is what draws me to such things. Surrender. To burn away one's self in the sandstone hills. To become part of the chanting wave of men[,] . . . the vortex in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque. (296)

When Owen presses James to acknowledge the appeal of this adventure, James instead offers a subtle revision of Owen's representation. " 'But do you see what draws me to the running?' " asks Owen. " 'To honor God, yes, I would run,' " James replies. " 'There is no God,' " Owen whispers. " 'Then you can't run, you mustn't run,' " James declares: " 'It's stupid and destructive' " (296). James's remark exposes the secular assumptions that govern Owen's version of the event and all readings, perhaps, that reduce the religious motive to a mere desire for self-annihilation, fusion with others, or relief from the burden of "free will and independent thought" (*Mao* 7). And it reminds us, if only briefly, of what the ceremony must mean to people of faith: not a movement of orgiastic fusion so much as a way to honor a divinity who also sponsors an entire civilization, with all its strengths and weaknesses. Yet this glimpse of a possible alternative perspective on what the pilgrims are doing is effectively canceled by Owen's assertion that there is no God, an assertion James chooses not to challenge and that DeLillo himself seems mostly to accept. The Muslims circling the Ka'bah may not be consciously caught up in a nihilistic effort to "burn away" the self, then, but they do appear to be in the grip of a dangerous delusion.

Scott and Karen, in *Mao II*, serve as actual spokespersons for movements of messianic fusion. They argue that movements like the Moonies', whatever their drawbacks, are "brave and visionary" responses to the bankruptcy of consumer culture: "Think of the future and how depressed you get,"

Scott suggests; "All the news is bad. We can't survive by needing more, wanting more, standing out, grabbing all we can" (89). Karen imagines her commitment to Reverend Moon's cult as a form of "self-control [that] cuts deep against the age, against the private ciphers, the systems of isolated craving," extending in their stead "the breadth of the body common" (10). *Mao II* implicitly endorses Scott and Karen's criticism of consumerism and its ethic of self-gratification. But it renders with visceral revulsion the world of "faceless" (70) crowds that Karen and religious rebels like her are preparing. The novel seethes with images of such crowds, and none of them is lovely. Indeed, the production of mobilized masses, whether explicitly religious or ostensibly secular, is represented by Bill Gray as a crime against the imagination and its works. ("This book is an argument about the future," DeLillo told an interviewer: "Who wins the struggle for the imagination of the world?" [DeLillo, "Don DeLillo" 296].) Gray insists against all arguments for messianic unification that "the experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, . . . how I need internal dissent, self-argument" in order to create (159). The novel, he continues, is "a democratic shout. . . . And this is what you want to destroy" (159). Earlier in *Mao II*, Bill finds other terms to valorize the novel, terms that suggest DeLillo's opposition to forms of religious mobilization through ecstatic fusion is not simply a matter of political antipathies. "The novel," Bill claims, "was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth" (72). This literary "mass" offers "transcendence" but of a resolutely worldly kind. It celebrates character—"one voice unlike the next" (159)—as well as communion. And it offers "truth" but in a context that also acknowledges "[a]mbiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints" (159). This semisacred literary instrument of transcendence is thus neither the traditional Latin Mass—although it is in some ways comparable to it—nor the contemporary messianic mass of Moonies and Maoists, with which it is locked in an apocalyptic struggle for the "imagination of the world."

The global struggle between the forces of messianic fusion and those of a weaker and more secular spirituality is provocatively and problematically staged at the very beginning of *Mao II* when the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's followers invade Yankee Stadium. "[M]arching into American sunlight" (3), they replace a Yankee game with a foreign game, the "democratic clamor" and "openness of form" of baseball (9) with the single voice and

total order of mass religion. The novel's zenophobic representation of the mass wedding of veiled women to identically dressed men in Yankee stadium as a form of alien invasion is recalled at the end of the novel in a way that drives home its threat to America and the response that is required. For the novel closes with another wedding scene, this one in war-torn Beruit. Brita Nilsson, in an act encoded by the novel as heroic, has just forcefully "unveiled" a Maoist terrorist in order to take his picture, and now, as she waits out the night in a friend's apartment, she is witness to a splendid interruption of the routine of war that is destroying the city. A wedding procession passes beneath her window—one bride and one groom, "surpassingly alive . . . transcendent" (240), celebrating joyously in the midst of ruin. Brita joins in, showering the couple with blessings in a range of languages, "calling down, 'Bonne chance' and 'Bonheur' and 'Good Luck' and 'Salam' and 'Skal' " (240). The "loss of scale and intimacy" (7) effected by Moon's ceremony is repaired here, and we are invited to find modeled in this manifestly multilingual, hybridized, and individualistic ceremony a positive alternative to the ceremonies of fusion that initiate the novel's action. A similar indictment through juxtaposition is effected in *The Names* through the implied contrast between the ecstatic, self-annihilating practices of the Muslim pilgrims at Mecca and the more restrained, multilingual, and secular style of worship encountered by James Axton when he finally makes his "pilgrimage" (5) to the Acropolis. Here, as in *Mao II*, the practice of ecstatic fusion is strongly but not exclusively marked as foreign and antidemocratic and represented as a very real threat to a Euro-American order identified with democracy and a respect for difference.

Of course similar arguments were used, until recently, by America's Protestant establishment to denigrate and "other" American Catholics. DeLillo never refers to this history, but its memory remains, as it were, just beneath the surface of the text. Thus the words "masses" and "massed" float through his depictions of the fused religious crowd, almost always with a pejorative inflection. The phobic use of such terms is a feature of Cold War anticommunism. But it is also a feature of the equally virulent discourse of American anti-Catholicism, which regularly represented the Catholic mass as a rite of superstitious surrender to the power of an alien Papacy. One wonders, then, whether DeLillo is signaling a partial assent to such charges when he puts the word "masses" into play in his indictments of Moonies, Muslims, and Maoists. Or is he, on the contrary, attempting to

export the indictment? By explicitly identifying "the Latin mass" with the "democratic" novel and by drawing most of his examples of religious dogmatism and mass enthusiasm from domestically marginal or non-European sources rather than from established Protestant and Catholic traditions, DeLillo helps reinforce the formula that equates enthusiasm, irrationalism, exclusivity and mindless obedience with civilized Europe's others, the domestic poor, and postcolonial humanity. One wishes, then, that the figures of fusion in *Mao II* and *The Names* were not so regularly identified with cultural others, whether Korean, or Middle Eastern, or Chinese, or Peruvian, and that DeLillo did not identify the rise of fundamentalist militancy in the United States, through his depiction of the Moonies, with the "conversion of the white-skinned by the dark" (89).

The Church Esoteric: The Path of Separation

If DeLillo tends to identify practices of ecstatic fusion and mass mobilization with "third world" religions and radical movements, he tends to identify a second form of spirituality, what I am calling the path of separation, with an even more automatically "othered" enterprise, that of terrorism. In several novels, he constructs characters identified simultaneously with state and nonstate systems of terror and with monastic practices. Mark Osteen has written trenchantly about this in *American Magic and Dread*. In his second novel, *End Zone*, Osteen shows, DeLillo traces the course of ascetic impulses and practices still vestigially linked to the religious as they are rearticulated with various forms of fascism, nuclear brinkmanship, and state terror. A similar dynamic is traced in *Players*; the protagonist, Lyle Wynant, is drawn into a terrorist scheme by ascetic motives—a contempt for the world, an impulse to "utter disengagement" (49–50), and a powerful will to transcendence—that seem more properly religious than political. (" 'Terror is purification,' " one character comments, drawing the parallels with characteristic clarity [102].) Ascetic motives govern Glen Selvy's choice of a clandestine life in *Running Dog*. And the polyglot, nihilistic sect of assassins who are "The Names" is driven by similar aversions and drives.

DeLillo seems at one level to be asking us to see the late twentieth-century fascination with underworlds of conspiracy and terror as a form of displaced spirituality: "The important thing about the paranoia in my

characters," he told an interviewer, "is that it operates as a form of religious awe. It's something old, a leftover from some forgotten part of the soul. And the intelligence agencies that create and service this paranoia are not interesting to me as spy handlers or masters of espionage. They represent old mysteries and fascinations, ineffable things. Central intelligence. They're like churches that hold the final secrets" (DeLillo, "Don DeLillo" 303). When "the Old God leaves the world" (*Mao* 7), in other words, all sorts of religious impulses remain—not just the "unexpended faith" (7) that sponsors movements of ecstatic fusion but other faithful impulses as well, including those that once fostered the world-renouncing practices identified with certain monastic traditions. These now homeless impulses can attach themselves, fatally, in DeLillo's opinion, to secular institutions, which may even at some level be said to exploit them to their own ends. The CIA functions simultaneously, then, as a "company" operated on the most ruthless principles of power and profit and as a "church" that focuses and articulates "old mysteries and fascinations."

Thus *Running Dog* (1978), which looks at first like an espionage thriller, turns out in the end to have been a spiritual thriller all along. But the protagonist remains unaware that his deepest motives are religious almost to the end, and the path he chooses, far from being affirmed, is subjected to the strongest criticism. The novel is a study in the path of separation. Like a number of DeLillo's protagonists (Lyle in *Players*, Owen in *The Names*), Glen Selvy has been seeking some kind of radical "release from experience" (233) for years. We see him, from the first, striving to achieve separation from others: he lives alone, has no friends, and restricts his erotic adventures to married women. And we see him, as well, trying in every possible way to limit and order the domain of his daily life: "There was nothing cynical in his view of the world. . . . It was a calculated existence, this. He preferred life narrowed down to unfinished rooms" (54). "It made no difference where he lived. It was all the same, mere coloration for the true life, for the empty meditations, the routine, the trade craft, the fine edge to be maintained in preparation for—he didn't know what. In preparation for what?" (54).

Gradually Selvy comes to a somewhat clearer sense of what he has been after and how he has been used: "All this time he'd been preparing to die. It was a course in dying. In how to die violently. . . . They'd spotted his potential, his capacity for favorable development. All this time. It was a

ritual preparation. . . . To ensure the success of the course, we ourselves will kill you" (183). Selvy is willing enough to die in this manner; indeed, he goes looking for just such a death, throwing away his guns and leading the agency assassins who think they are stalking him to a desert site where the final scene can be enacted in secret. The drift of DeLillo's argument is clear. Selvy is an unchurched ascetic, a would-be monk or martyr who has lent his energies to an utterly unworthy institution. He has been caught up, then, not in some merely technical and worldly trade but in practices tuned to "old mysteries and fascinations," drives that long ago sent men like him who were sick of the world and the flesh into other deserts or compelled them to engage in other deadly confrontations.

But the differences between his practices and theirs, DeLillo suggests, is far from trivial. The agency can "represent old mysteries" but only in a debased and unsatisfying manner. The school for dying it convenes offers its pupils an utterly unembellished and meaningless "release from experience." Selvy himself testifies to the inadequacy of this program by trying to plot his death not simply in terms of its nihilistic narrative but also in terms of an ancient religious practice of dying. Just before the end he is reunited, at the desert training camp for counterterror, with Levi Blackwater, a "Gringo mystic." Levi, it turns out, once instructed Selvy in the Tibetan Buddhist art of dying, with its rich iconography, elaborate ritual demands, and promise of transcendence and enlightenment. Now Selvy declares that he is ready to die in the manner it prescribes: ready to find and follow the "clear light" (233) that in the Buddhist tradition leads the properly prepared soul to nirvana. But as Levi points out, Selvy's knowledge of this tradition is ludicrously inadequate: "We were just beginning to understand," he insists. "There's so much more" (233).

Events confirm Levi's teacherly qualms. Selvey confronts his adversaries, kills one, and is killed in turn by the second. His last thought is of spirits rather than the spiritual: "What he needed right now was a drink" (239). The full significance of this reflection is easy to miss—the passage in fact constitutes a kind of private joke, accessible only to those familiar with the particular Buddhist path Selvey is trying to follow. Selvy might seem simply to die ingloriously, a recovering alcoholic dreaming at the end not of redemption but of another drink. But in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, his final thought is profoundly consequential. In the preface to the American edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the editor points out that,

"Buddhists and Hindus alike believe that the last thought of the moment of death determines the character of the next incarnation" (Evans-Wentz xviii). Far from following the "clear light" that liberates the soul from further incarnations, Selvy, who has only recently stopped drinking (231), will be coming round again as an unhappy addict.

And Levi will be unable to help him avoid this fate, although he decides to perform the complex "*lipho-bo service*" described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a service designed, the book tells us, to "help the spirit of the deceased to find its way to the Western Paradise of Amitabha" (Evans-Wentz 18). "This was a *lama* function," Levi muses, "and therefore an enormous presumption . . . but he had love in his heart for the world. . . . He believed he would *feel* something; something would *tell* him whether he was on the right path" (245–46). Levi's own all-too-American spiritual optimism and sentimentality shine through here. But he, too, is about to be disappointed: the "path" he plans to take, like the one Selvy imagined for himself, is impassable. Levi remembers, correctly, that "you started [the service] by plucking a few strands of hair from the top of the dead man's head" (246). These are the last words of the novel. What he does not know, although we readers do, is that Selvy's assassin has cut off his head and carried it away. The novel ends, in other words, with the assertion of a macabre (but by now entirely plausible) equation among espionage, terror, and asceticism and with a macabre spiritual joke, a joke at the expense of two "New Age" mystics and the hopelessly naive, do-it-yourself, spiritual culture they represent. Selvy's spirituality is "such an oversimplification," Levi muses, "[h]e believed easily and indiscriminately, taking to things with a quick and secret fervor" (245). Here is a portrait, then, of Charles Taylor's spiritual "beginner" as a tragic-comic grotesque.

DeLillo is suspicious, I think, not just of contemporary culture and the aberrant asceticisms it sponsors but of the ascetic path itself: of people who try to "escape the pull of the earth" (*White Noise* 303). Moll Robbins, Selvy's lover, sees his asceticism as a sign of a deficiency, "a meagerness of spirit," shared by all those who quest fiercely after redemption, whether "in an object of some kind, or inner occasion, or answer, or state of being." (224). The suggestion here is that fierce ascetics like Selvy suffer from a spiritual deficiency rather than from an abundance of gifts: they lack the gifts that enable others to live with confusion and complexity in the world.

Perhaps, DeLillo suggests, this poverty is culturally produced. Selvy has

been raised in a culture of consumption that stimulates unappeasable grasping, and his only spiritual teacher has been a half-mad bush vet self-taught in Tibetan Buddhist lore. No wonder he is so hungry, no wonder he is so foolish. And no wonder that we sense, in the end, that DeLillo has a certain sympathy for his murderous and misguided young protagonist. Like Karen in *Mao II*, Selvey stands both as a study in spiritual hunger and naïveté and as an indictment of a culture that refuses to take spirituality seriously, to recognize and address needs and impulses that will have their day, one way or another, and that can either be left to erupt in profoundly destructive ways or can be confronted and addressed in ways that may make their negotiation possible. There is no exclusively secular option, then, in DeLillo's world, only a choice of how secular-minded peoples will approach that complex of intuitions and impulses identified with the religious.

Running Dog's exploration of the impulse to ascetic separation is anticipated in *Players*, an equally brilliant early novel. Lyle, the novel's protagonist, resembles Selvy in his contempt for the messiness of ordinary life, which resolves itself in his loveless mind into a mundane chaos of meaningless options and obligations. Like Selvy, Lyle seeks refuge from this messiness in the esoteric disciplines of his work, first as a stockbroker, then as a terrorist or counterterrorist. Entangled in a shadowy plot to blow up the New York Stock Exchange, he finds it easy to cut the few ties that connect him to any stable identity and community. And in the final, ambiguous scene, he experiences a form of violent dematerialization already identified in the novel with the self-immolation of Buddhist monks in Vietnam. Lyle doesn't actually burn to death, it would seem, but whatever does overtake him is a form of radical dispossession. Sitting in the anonymous motel room, he sheds "capabilities and traits by the second" until he is "barely recognizable as male" (212). And all the while, "sunlight fills the room. . . . Specks blaze up . . . [and] [t]he whole room, the motel, is surrendered to this moment of luminous cleansing" (212).

Lyle's experience recalls not only the self-immolation of Buddhist monks protesting the Vietnam War but a whole tradition of monastic struggle and triumph. In a famous text of early Christian monasticism, the *Sayings of the Fathers*, the divinization of desert monastics, which follows their successful struggle with demons, "is often symbolized through the language of fire, sometimes in a visionary context." Thus a "brother of Scetis, looking through the window, sees Abba Arsinius 'like fire from head to feet' " (cited

in McGinn 137). Lyle, too, burns. And like the desert fathers, he has been struggling with demons. ("When Rosemary came out . . . she had a plastic phallus harnessed to her body" [197]; "She knows things," Lyle thinks, "She knows his soul, for instance" [210].) One character even claims that financial experts like Lyle are "more spiritually advanced than monks on an island" (107). But Lyle's efforts to "build a space between himself and most of the people he was likely to deal with" (72) seem motivated less by some exalted appetite for the ineffable than by a "defect of love or involvement" (55) that leads him to seek "exemption" (197) from "the vast world of other people's pain" (56). And his immolation seems less to purify him than to effect his final reduction to nothingness. Thus *Players* ends as *Running Dog* does, with a bitterly ironic and complexly unsettling allusion to a traditional spiritual itinerary of ascetic struggle and redemption. By dramatizing Selvy's failed effort to follow the Tibetan Buddhist path, and Lyle's blind and distorted retracing of the path of radical renunciation, DeLillo insists that the impulses which produced these ancient spiritual itineraries survive and suggests that if the original itineraries were morally dubious, their secular replacements are thoroughly horrific.

This lesson is repeated, with a vengeance, in *The Names*. The members of the cult that gives its name to the novel are students of separation in the tradition of Selvy and Lyle. Disgusted with the flesh, they are fascinated with secrecy, ascetic self-deprivation, arbitrary order, and ritual murder. "These people are monks," one character exclaims, "they're secular monks. They want to vault into eternity" (203). But the leap they envision has nothing to do with love and everything with a soul-weary nihilism, a deficiency of love and involvement. When they are last seen, they are in a desert, dispersing, blowing on the wind. They represent, then, a kind of ultimate image of what the impulse to ascetic order and separation can produce in an utterly godless world. Following Weber, perhaps, DeLillo goes on to suggest that similar drives sponsor secular science, business, and even the arts. For characters from each of these domains are drawn to the cult, and their various labors are assimilated, in the novel, to an imperial project whose slogan might well be "Subdue and codify" (80). Owen Brademas, the scientist, succumbs most fully to the appeal of the cult, virtually joining the assassins. Frank Volterra, the artist, dreams of filming an assassination. Only James Axton, the businessman, draws back, but it turns out that he has for some time been participating in an equally deadly and esoteric project, that

of the CIA in its efforts to subdue and codify the entire world in the name of the American imperium. Ultimately, then, for DeLillo as for Weber, the problematic ascetic impulses that once sponsored various monastic practices emerge in more secular times as the secret sponsors of global conquest and control. Their recontainment in explicitly religious form might produce a kind of respite (or simply new crusades), but DeLillo holds out little hope either for their annihilation or for their pacification.

The Church Sacramental, and a Secularized Sacramentality

If DeLillo consistently exposes and warns against ecstatic and ascetic forms of spiritual practice, he does so, I'd argue, from a position broadly identifiable with three sacramentalist countertraditions, those of the Catholic Church itself, of American natural piety, and of American pragmatism. It is within these traditions that we find most fully developed the themes to which DeLillo returns as he attempts to imagine positive forms of the religious life. Sacramentalism, roughly defined, emphasizes the immanence of divine grace and the holiness of this world. Catholic sacramentalism, as described by the theologian David Tracy, corrects the anticosmic, transcendental bias of other Catholic traditions by celebrating "the ordinary, the concrete, the everyday" (379), representing them as quick with redemptive energies. It views "all creation—the body, sexuality, community, nature—as a gracious gift to be enjoyed in a natural, embodied, sensate, concretely human manner" (381). And it celebrates "our primordial belonging-to, our radical participation in this body, this family, this people, this community, this church, this tradition, this history, this planet, even this cosmos" (380).

In his study of the Catholic tradition in American letters, Paul Giles traces a strong strand of sacramental materialism running through Catholic writers as diverse as Orestes Brownson, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack Kerouac. Brownson's "doctrine of 'communion,' " for instance, challenged transcendentalist orthodoxy by asserting that the individual "needs to communicate with the objective world of family, society, nation, in order fully to realize his latent humanity" (57). Brownson argued that "a human being should acquiesce in his provisional terrestrial status. He should not be forever desiring to transcend it, in Emersonian fashion, by the self-deluding

ambition of trying to intuit divine being" (57). Dreiser, equally committed to an incarnational view of the world, produced a new kind of American novel at odds with the " 'Protestant' genre of American romance analyzed by Richard Chase." While the romance "dissolves the mundane world into a more lucid spiritual allegory," Giles explains, "Catholic realism invests the mundane world itself with sacramental significance" (168). The anti-transcendentalist biases of this tradition tend to extend as well to all plans for perfecting this world. Giles's realists insist "on the obduracy of material circumstances and upon the impossibility of any apocalyptic reordering of those circumscribed conditions of life" (168). Here, too, the tradition is at odds with important aspects of the larger culture, more precisely its affirmation of self-perfectibility and collective progress.

Had he wished to trace the development of such perspectives and themes in the work of an influential Catholic intellectual, Giles might have turned to George Santayana. Santayana, like many fellow pragmatists (but unlike William James), sought to elaborate what might be called a natural spirituality, one purged of all explicit elements of supernaturalism but respectful of other aspects of traditional spirituality. In a most useful essay on the pragmatists, Nancy Frankenberry notes that while figures like James and Dewey, as heirs "of the Enlightenment," were "troubled by the ways in which sectarian religions were responsible for superstition and fanaticism," they remained interested in spiritual phenomena and respectful of religious emotions such as reverence, awe, and fidelity (121). Reading across their works, Frankenberry claims, and the work of Whitehead and Santayana as well, one finds a cluster of recurrent themes including the acceptance of human finitude and mortality, the cultivation of human connections and human joys, and a larger fidelity, as Dewey put it, " 'to the nature to which we belong' " (121). Santayana's version of this spirituality is particularly apposite here. His "secularized Catholic, sacramental sensibility" (121) anticipates DeLillo's own sensibility in much the same way as James's more supernaturalist sensibility does Pynchon's. Santayana called on religious believers and secularists alike to throw off their transcendent dreams and accept the facts of human mortality and profound limitation. Such a conversion, he acknowledged, would leave life more deeply shadowed: "death-haunted creatures subjected to experiences of all kinds of bad things have every motive to cry" (Levinson, *Santayana* 69). But it might also compel these same creatures to take on important responsibilities and to feel,

in Levinson's words, "a mortal gladness not encumbered by deception or self-deception" (232). Acknowledging the "sources of his being" in culture and nature, the individual would develop a "reverent attachment" to these sources and would experience the "steadying of his life by that attachment" (Santayana 179). He would prefer his homeland and community but not begrudge others their different places or preferences. And he would extend his sense of home to ever wider zones, embracing ultimately the cosmos itself, which "vegetates so grandly and so sadly" and is "the source of all our energies, the home of all our happiness" (Santayana 191). These revitalized feelings of reverence for the cosmos and the human community would sponsor secular but unworldly forms of worship, prayer, and communion, through which "people . . . prone to moral weightlessness, anxiety, and fear in the face of their finitude and death" would "learn to love life in the full consciousness of impotence" (Levinson, *Santayana* 230).

One recognizes immediately the kinship between Santayana's vision of "people prone to moral weightlessness" and the unchurched and irresponsible Americans who populate DeLillo's fiction. And it's clear, as well, that the spiritual path recommended by Santayana anticipates that which the most fortunate of these characters follow. These characters, who when they first appear exemplify weightlessness and anxiety, are delivered by descent into the quotidian from this condition into one of secular (or postsecular) reverence and felt responsibility. And they are delivered at the same time from what might be called the rituals of privileged privatization to participation in more public and culturally inclusive ceremonies of worldly communion. DeLillo does not foreclose the possibility of a "something more" beyond the quotidian, as Santayana does. But he suggests, in his postsecular narratives of conversion, that spiritual nourishment can best be found by way of a departure downward, from all sorts of strategies of abstraction and insulation, into the living cosmos.

The main characters of *Players*, a privileged young professional couple, are already advanced students of the secular arts of protective self-isolation and distraction. Lyle and Pammy have virtually no ties to family or community; they have withdrawn defensively from the public zones of their city, reduced their contact with others to the exchange of a series of clever verbal "routines," and developed forms of self-distancing that enable them to distract themselves from their own deepest fears and feelings. Pammy, who works for a firm called "Grief Management" (18), displays these skills in a

wonderful little scene early in the novel. Pausing to unlock her apartment door, she is assaulted momentarily by an unwanted feeling: "She remembered what had been bothering her, the vague presence. Her life. She hated her life. It was a minor thing though, a small bother. She tended to forget about it. When she recalled what it was that had been on her mind, she felt satisfied at having remembered and relieved that it was nothing worse" (32). Lyle, as we have seen, develops his impulse to distancing and denial into a kind of perverse asceticism. But Pammy's relation to the world is more ambivalent; even the outset of the novel, she is drawn to "the earthly merit" (32) of the peaches she buys, although she can't "deal with the consequences of fruit, its perishability, the duty involved in eating it" (35). Her spiritual education, which the action of the novel relates, entails learning to accommodate this economy of life and death, satisfaction and duty.

Thus she learns, in a complex final movement of transgression, denial, shocked awakening, and cathartic communion, to honor what the novel calls "the processes of the physical world" (201), including her own mortality, and to take "responsibility," a key word in the novel's moral vocabulary, for her actions. And she learns, as well, that such commitments are paradoxically liberating and empowering. The stages of this movement are worth tracing in some detail, both because they are so subtly and persuasively crafted and because they expose the moral seriousness and postsecular cast of DeLillo's vision.

The crisis that transforms Pammy is triggered by what seems at first to be a sanctioned act of transgression. On vacation in Maine with her boss Ethan and his bisexual lover, Jack Laws, Pammy succumbs to Jack's advances and has sex with him. Both Jack and Pammy seem to imagine the act as a kind of innocent dalliance: "It was to be a serene event, easefully pleasant sex between friends" (165). Pammy justifies it to herself by appealing to an ethical commonplace of her secular culture: "For years she'd heard people saying, all sorts, really, here and there: 'Do whatever you want as long as nobody gets hurt.' They said: 'As long as both parties agree, do it, whatever.' They said: 'Whatever feels right, as long as you both want to do it and nobody gets hurt, there's no reason not to.' . . . They said: 'Follow your instincts, be yourself, act out your fantasies' " (143). The popular discourse of nature that identifies instincts with earthiness and both with innocence provides Pammy with a second justification:

"Come on, Laws, sink in, be one, merge."
"Be one with the grass."
"The earth, the ground."
"Earth, creature, touch."
"Blend," she said. (164)

But the event itself reveals the shortcomings both of Pammy's permissive ethical code and of her half-mocking nature mysticism. A kind of redemptive merging does occur, as Pammy, deeply aroused, is "able to break through . . . nearly free from panic and the tampering management of her own sense of fitness," first to "study her own involvement" and then to experience, unreflectively, "a transporting" and "exalting" experience of mysterious "replenishments," "the mysteries of muscles and blood" (168). But, still unready to deal with the other side of such carnal communion, she almost immediately recoils: "The earth had hurt. The goddamn ground" (169). And she recoils not just from the Earth itself but also from the kind of moral grounding produced by intimacy, wondering "why she was so concerned about" Jack (169) and assuring him, when he begins to worry about the consequences of their act, that it's " 'No big deal' " (170). " 'Not for you,' " Jack responds, insisting that it is a big deal for himself and for his lover, Ethan, who unlike Pammy, " 'is responsible. . . . He is willing to be that. . . . He is willing to be responsible' " (170). Pammy goes on refusing to take Jack's remorse seriously, and this second refusal to honor the obligations of intimacy contributes to Jack's suicidal depression.

Jack's suicide by self-immolation finally sponsors a grief that Pammy cannot manage, although she continues to try. But her breakdown itself produces a redemptive turning. Struggling with her own grief, and watching Ethan mourn, Pammy realizes that "people unconsciously honored the processes of the physical world, danced fatalistically with nature whenever death took someone close to them" (201). And she begins to learn a version of that dance herself. Deciding "not to fly back" to New York, she submits, as if in order to acknowledge the truth of distance and time, and to expose herself to her own feelings, to the "eleven-hour bus ride" (203). Her conscious goal is "to be back in the apartment, closed away again, spared the need to react tenderly to things" (204). Once home, however, she continues to work "unconsciously" toward an honoring of the most basic human

processes: Jack's life and death, her grief, the very rhythms and risks of mortal life she has trained herself to deny. Unable to sleep, she watches, with mingled self-contempt and conviction, an old movie—"inept and boring," she decides—that depicts the banal ordeals and tragedies of domestic life. The film's protagonist, a man whose history uncannily resembles that of a character in the novel (Frank McKechnie), is besieged by "serial grief" (205): his wife has cancer; his brother is in debt to mobsters; his son has serious mental problems. Neither the characters nor Pammy herself can "manage" this grief: "[A]wash with emotion," Pammy sits "crying," as the wife struggles to make sense of her mortal disease, the brother vows to reform, the boy recovers, and the hero watches "his youngest child ride a pony" (205). The film seems to work, in the manner of a secular wisdom story, to drive home the grievous facts of mortality and to make ordinary life seem precious. It makes it possible, in some mysterious way, for Pammy to accept the mortal economy of love and loss, pleasure and duty, that she has resisted so long, and it rewards her for this acceptance by leaving her hungry for life: "She craved a roast beef sandwich, a cold beer. Nothing here [in the antiseptic space of the apartment] but envelopes of soup" (206).

The New York into which Pammy descends is a city transfigured by her redemptive surrender to the logic of mortal life. Like Santayana's universe, it is at once awesome and profoundly imperfect, bountiful and fatal, "a soul that imposes and burdens and defrauds," Pammy thinks, "half mad, but free with its tribal bounty, sized to immense design" (207). Pammy finds herself, to her surprise, caught up in a ceremony of secular communion: "Everyone was eating. Wherever she looked there were mouths moving, people handling food, passing it around" (206). This is not the heavenly city, DeLillo acknowledges; indeed, it's more like that other city of the Bible, Babel or Babylon, a "babble king of cities" (206). But it is not entirely like those cities of irresponsibility either. Instead, for Pammy at least, it is a place where one can come to terms at last, in company with fellow humans, with the facts and responsibilities of a merely mortal, but still spiritually resonant, existence. Thus Pammy, in the final test of her education, finds herself literally "under the sign" of mortality: "She walked beneath a flophouse marquee. It read: TRANSIENTS." Her first response is an old one—denial. The word takes "on an abstract tone, as words had done before in her experience" and threatens to evade "the *responsibilities* of content" (207, emphasis mine). But Pammy has changed, has learned

to "deal with the consequences" of her embeddedness in natural processes, to pay attention to troubling messages. Her final act is a literal conversion, or turning, from irresponsible denial and isolation to a moment at least of responsible acknowledgment and communion with her fellow humans: "Pammy stopped walking, turned her body completely and looked once more at the sign. Seconds passed before she grasped its meaning" (207).

Narrative and thematic elements introduced in *Players* recur repeatedly in the work that follows as DeLillo continues to contrast the soul-withering itineraries of those inclined to separation with the soul-replenishing experiences of his most fortunate characters. *The Names*, *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld* all deliver up their protagonists to unconventional experiences of revitalizing conversion. And in *The Names*, particularly, DeLillo traces the conversion of a recognizably postmodern character to a form of postsecular spirituality.

The novel is more explicitly religious in its preoccupations than *Players*. Indeed, it begins with a scene in which the spiritual alienation and neediness of its privileged, cosmopolitan characters is comically but emphatically thematized. "Give us something to believe in," one member of the gang of privileged expatriates demands, in drunken mockery, of James Axton, the novel's narrator and protagonist; "We need a Japanese monk" (5). James seems a most unlikely vessel for any kind of religious revitalization. Resident in Athens for some time, he has failed, for reasons he cannot explain, even to visit its most sacred site, the Acropolis: "I'd been slow to make the pilgrimage," he acknowledges (5), in a remark that seems innocuous at the moment but that begins to resonate as character after character embarks on some kind of religious journey. Owen Brademas, another of DeLillo's unlucky adepts of separation, finds himself, at the end of his pilgrimage, entangled in terror and confined to a bare and empty room: his itinerary echoes Lyle's. But Axton finally makes his way to the Acropolis where he experiences a ceremony of mortal communion not unlike the one Pammy experiences at the end of *Players*.

James is delivered to this ceremony, and the style of being it sacralizes, out of a recognizably contemporary practice of the self. One of DeLillo's most brilliantly drawn postmoderns, he is committed to using his privileged mobility to elude every kind of responsibility. An expatriate on an expense account, James likes "to drift across continents and languages, suspending the operation of sound thought" (43). When he is asked how long

he will stay in Athens, he responds, "Awhile. Until I begin to feel I know it here. Until I begin to feel responsible" (130). But James, like Pammy, is only ambivalently committed to the strategies of disengagement he practices: he regrets the collapse of his family life, destroyed by a casual act of infidelity, and struggles even as he celebrates irresponsibility and drift to stay in touch with his estranged wife and son. So he is positioned, like Pammy, for a conversion to responsibility.

But what would such a conversion entail? Once again, DeLillo works in *The Names* to distinguish the spiritually resonant vision he recommends from the vision of normative spiritualities. In particular, he is at pains to draw a distinction between the transcendental and totalizing aspects of classical Hellenism, which as the poststructuralists remind us have defined certain strands of Western secular and religious thought alike, from a countertradition, also identified with Greece. " 'Look to small things for your truth, your joy,' " Owen insists, rehearsing this counterphilosophy. "This is the Greek specific," (26) he continues, using the term to suggest both "prescription" and a perspective that resists the transcendentalizing practices of abstraction, generalization, and totalization. The novel lends its support to this prescription, celebrating the "mystery" that is "part" of "ordinary and familiar . . . things," the "nameless way in which we sometimes feel our connections to the physical world. *Being here*" (32). But it also insists, as *Gravity's Rainbow* does, that the price of such blessings is the acceptance of the fiercer aspects of the physical world, of the "elemental" as well as the "sensuous": "This is one of those Greek places that pits the sensuous against the elemental. The sun, the colors, the sea light, the great black bees, what physical delight, what fertile slow-working delight. Then the goatherd on the barren hill, the terrible wind" (26). Axton gives us another formulation of this reverence for the physical world, this Zen-like spiritual materialism, when he identifies himself and his wife as participants in "the Christian dispersion": "The quasi-stellar object, the quantum event, these were the sources of our speculation and wonder. Our bones were made of material that came swimming across the galaxy from exploded stars. This knowledge was our shared prayer, our chant. The grim inexplicable was there, the God-mass looming" (92). A brilliant encapsulation of one strand of contemporary spiritual history, the passage traces a transfer of reverence from transcendent "God" to cosmic "God-mass" and defines the cosmos itself as both gifting and grim in a way that resembles the Greek landscape itself.

James's protest against the Acropolis, at the novel's outset, is based in part on his sense that it celebrates ideals—"Beauty, dignity, order, proportion" (3), the "aloof, rational, timeless, pure" (330)—at odds with the messy, many-sided, and time-haunted God-mass he prays to. But the Acropolis is also, in the cultural imagination of the West, a temple to democracy, and James's failure to make the pilgrimage is also a sign of his refusal to accept the political obligations entailed by his reverence for the ordinary pleasures and extraordinary wonders of the Earth. If to be "unconnected to the earth" is to be "nonpolitical" (171), as Owen and James agree, then to be connected is for DeLillo to accept the obligations of embeddedness in communities that need careful tending. Chief among these obligations, DeLillo implies, is that of protecting these communities from all those forces, theological or philosophical, religious or secular, that would threaten to reduce their fecund diversity to sameness. James, to borrow a passage from *Players*, can't "deal with" (35) this obligation. Just as he prefers to see the ancient Minoan culture he admires as committed to domestic delights and nothing more (82), so he refuses to face the fell aspects of his own imperial civilization. As a result, he winds up participating, blindly, in its imperial project, a project—to "[s]ubdue and codify" (80) that the novel depicts as the secular expression of classical dreams of perfect order.

Thus just as Pammy is awakened by a recognition of betrayal, so is Axton. When he learns he has been working for the CIA, he is devastated: "This mistake of mine, this failure to concentrate, to occupy a serious center—it had the effect of justifying everything Kathryn [his wife] had ever said about me. . . . It was that kind of error, unlimited in connection and extent, shining a second light on anything and everything" (317). In the wake of the error, Axton experiences his own conversion to responsibility. He accepts the identity Kathryn has long been insisting he take seriously—"*American*" (328)—and commits himself to attentiveness in a way that recalls Pammy's struggle with the word "transients." "How do you connect things?" Axton asks himself, and his answer, "learn their names" (328), is richly resonant. It recalls, of course, the novel's title but also the title of the murderous sect that calls itself "The Names" (188). And it directs our attention to an aspect of the novel that I will not pause to explore in detail, that of language and naming. Mark Osteen's discussion of *The Names* in *American Magic and Dread* makes powerful sense of the language theme and of its discrimination of spirit-filled languages, religious and aesthetic, in particular. Osteen helps us see that naming, for DeLillo, can constitute

a crucial act of moral attention to the virtually sacred specificity of things, as well as to their relatedness in an ideally open system that is ultimately not simply linguistic or physical but both and more as well: profoundly, movingly, mysterious and significant.

One can speak of Axton's conversion as in some sense a religious one, then, because it entails both an acknowledgment of mystery and an acceptance of responsibility. And one can speak of it in this way as well because these commitments are ceremonially affirmed. For DeLillo, the return to spiritual styles of being is never simply an intellectual or emotional or moral event: a rectification of individual thought, feeling, and action. It always entails, as well, a return to communal practices, to community and communion. Thus James, as if in reward for his conversion to responsibility, is finally allowed to join the crowd of pilgrims ascending to the Acropolis. When he reaches that sacred site, he discovers a ceremony he can affirm, one that is not a celebration of transcendental order and does not involve a surrender of the specificities of the self. "I'd seen the temple a hundred times from the street," Axton recalls, "never suspecting it was this big, this scarred, broken, rough. . . . It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure. . . . It wasn't a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below it. This was a surprise. I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order. I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found. . . . I found a cry for pity[,] . . . this open cry, this voice we know as our own" (329–30). The temple James finally reaches, at the end of his pilgrimage, turns out to celebrate a vision of the sacred he can embrace, one closer to kenotic and immanental traditions of Christology, with their emphasis on the suffering communion of the divine with the human, than to the high Christology of Hellenistic Christianity, with its emphasis on divine perfection and transcendence. The "mauled" stones cry out like Christianity's crucified divinity, in a "voice we know as our own." But it is the cosmos itself that cries here, the "god-mass" to which we belong, which we fashion and that fashions us.

The tone of the passage cited above is solemn and somber, its subject our subjection to the "elemental" aspects of the world in which we live. But the ceremony DeLillo imagines honors the mixed economy of this world, its "sensuous" aspects as well as its "elemental." As in Pammy's Manhattan street, so here there is companionship and the pleasure of talk: "People came through the gateway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assem-

blies. No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language" (331). DeLillo is celebrating the "earthly merit" of community and conversation here, their sensuous blessings. But he is also drawing very careful distinctions between the kind of spiritual practice he can affirm and the kinds that he rejects as dangerous. The last sentence in the passage invites us to compare this gathering of deeply moved and even "hypnotically" (229) focused worshipers to other gatherings depicted in the novel. But when we do so, we recognize that Axton's fellow worshipers retain an individuality annihilated in the "vortex in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque" (296), and that the open liturgy of their many voices represents a dialogic and emphatically human alternative to "the worldwind [*sic*]" of "the spirit's voice" (337) that possesses DeLillo's Pentecostals. Vortex and whirlwind alike catch things up, unmake them and carry them away. The postsecular ceremony DeLillo improvises here (like the forms of worship endorsed by Santayana) leaves us firmly situated in self and specific community, brings us together in a way that honors our differences, asks us to acknowledge and honor the copresence of pain and pleasure, community and difference, in the "rich, harsh, mysterious, strong" world we inhabit. Such acknowledgment, DeLillo insists, does not release us from our pain. But it can release people like Axton from their headlong and hopeless flight from pain, a flight that tends to issue in acts of irresponsibility and self-annihilation that find their most extreme expression in terror. The sect of assassins, then, is "engaged in a painstaking denial. We can see them as people intent on ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature" (175). An affirmation of that nature, DeLillo insists, not only reduces our tendency to practice terroristic forms of denial; it also enables us to experience and honor the mortal delights that are, paradoxically, our only intimations of immortality.

White Noise

The secularization narrative sketched out in the texts we have been discussing is articulated with particular clarity in *White Noise*. Once upon a

time, according to this narrative, certain deep and ubiquitous human fears were addressed by institutional religion, which offered believers a whole range of services. To the vast majority, religion provided what DeLillo calls "magic"—the ultimate explanations, recipes for redemption, charms and chants and rituals with which to dispel "the terror in [their] souls" (*Names* 308). When the secular discourses of reason, science, and democracy sought to discredit religion, they did so both by challenging its "truthfulness" and by claiming to more effectively address, by purely natural and rational means, the terrors it sought to assuage. But these promises of an end to the ancient reign of political and personal terror have proven unfounded, DeLillo insists, and our ostensibly secular system survives today by providing versions of the old magical palliatives to people desperate to be "dazzled" (*Players* 151). " 'What have you been trying to do all these years,' " Murray asks the secular protagonist of *White Noise* at one point. " 'Put myself under a spell, I guess,' " he replies (287).

As Mark Osteen shows, then, *White Noise* is a study of "American magic and dread" at work in "those postmodern temples—the supermarket, the mall, the TV, the motel—where we seek 'peace of mind in a profit oriented context' " (166). Its focus is on the sanctioned rituals of a secularized spirituality practiced by white, middle-class Americans. Frank Lentricchia suggests that DeLillo sees a "new Roman Church" emerging in contemporary rituals of consumption, and Thomas Ferraro contends that when Jack Gladney's children see their mother on TV the effect is "something like a secular Mass" (27). Indeed, all the contributors to Lentricchia's influential collection *New Essays on White Noise* acknowledge the novel's preoccupation with various forms of secular spirituality. Valdez Moses even observes that for DeLillo, "postmodern society," far from being "demystified and secularized," has "unexpectedly produc[ed] its own set of myths, cults, gods, and immortals" (71). Where they part company is in their assessment of the novel's response to this phenomenon, especially insofar as it is expressed in cults of consumption, electronic communication, and celebrity. Lentricchia (and more recently, Paul Maltby and Mark Osteen) suggests that for all his distrust of the new culture, DeLillo, in the end, may be inviting us to view it sympathetically or at least fatalistically, as a new form of community just getting its start. Other contributors argue that DeLillo is more critical of the new forms of communion he so brilliantly depicts. Ferraro, for instance, suggests that for DeLillo "consumerism pro-

duces . . . an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power" (20) and that while the Gladneys do experience glimmerings of communion in "the temples of consumer culture," these temples do not enable them "to marshal their own recognitions of the sacred and the necessary" in any sustained and enabling way (35).

I'd agree that *White Noise* views the magical culture of consumer capitalism with some sympathy and wonder. It invites us to marvel at the hectic ingenuity of that culture, its capacity to fashion secular alternatives to sacred practices out of the most apparently debased and insignificant materials. And it suggests that on a certain level, the magic works: it keeps people going from day to day, gives them some respite from the terror in their souls. Finally, it insists on the tremendous power of the mechanisms in play: the institutional strength of the new Roman church of consumption. But this sympathy is finally cut, I'd also argue, by a harsher judgment. The novel invites us to consider the grotesque extremes to which people will go to assuage their sense of vulnerability, to marvel at their absurd and pitiable gullibility, and most of all to face the scandal of an ostensibly secular and rational society governed by debased versions of the very religious drives and practices it prides itself on having cast off. And it also invites us to see the new magic as increasing our prospects for social and environmental catastrophe, to recognize that our "liberation" from religion has led not to the noble autonomy and freedom promised by its Enlightenment advocates, but to entrapment within new forms of surrender and servitude.

Lentricchia ends his essay with a kind of shrug of resignation. He is clearly no fan of the "new Roman Church" of consumerism. But he's ready—as he thinks DeLillo is—to give it a chance, and he concludes that it's "[h]ard to say, before it comes to pass, in all its laws, liturgies, and forms of behavior, that it will do any more damage than the old" (113). It is, of course, hard to say. But I think that DeLillo's picture of the new church is darker than Lentricchia suggests. DeLillo certainly suggests that it can do more damage than the old, if only because it serves to anesthetize people to the potentially terminal damage being done in the name of consumption to the Earth and to human bodies. Humans who shop for manufactured goods in order to assuage their fears of death, who chant product names as charms against anxiety, and who turn to officially sanctioned "experts" and politicians for comforting constructions of reality are caught in a particu-

larly vicious circle. They depend for consolation on the very forces that are orchestrating ecological catastrophe.

DeLillo suggests as well that the new church is even less successful than the old in helping people assuage the terrors of the self. For if the traditional faiths offered a similar sort of "magic" to the many—taught them that they could conquer uncertainty and mortality through specific sets of ritualized practices—these same traditions also offered believers the opportunity to acknowledge and grapple with what terrified them: to see themselves as mortal, human authority as imperfect, the cosmos as mysterious. And with this invitation (delivered within the same discursive continuum that issued invitations to merely magical resolutions) came the opportunity to experience—without an undertone of panic or the din of white noise—certain states of engaged equanimity unavailable in the marketplace.

If the novel offers any images of possibility, then, it is not, I'd argue, through its delineation of the new cults of consumption and entertainment, which for many critics seem to represent the only modes of religiosity dramatized in the novel. DeLillo proposes, in the place of the self-consolidating and inflating rituals of consumption so well analyzed by Osteen and others, self-loosening or "weakening" practices that seem at once more ethically responsible and more likely to diminish the terror of death that haunts the major characters in the novel. The novel's ontological insistence on the radical porousness of all entities, including the self, prepares us to see the deep logic of such practices. Not only "waves and radiation" (326) but messages, toxic gasses, and even Jack's son Wilder seem able to pass at will through minds, solid bodies, and violent traffic flows. Jack finally discovers the capacity to make less of himself, and of his fears, in the course of the nightly gatherings on the freeway overpass.

The Jack we meet at the beginning of *White Noise* is a conventional person who practices a number of popular strategies for self-mystification: he has created a powerful professional persona for himself, shaped his home into a clamorous haven, turned his wife (who is as terrified of death as he is) into a kind of domestic Earth mother, surrendered his intelligence to the authorities, and mastered the rituals of shopping. But these strategies, only partially successful at best, prove entirely inadequate after he is chemically contaminated during a massive "toxic event." Desperately, hysterically afraid, he turns to his friend Murray Siskind for advice, then embarks on the series of adventures and conversions that constitute the final, frantic

movement of the novel. These movements are at once vertiginously headlong and intricately rendered: spiritual slapstick combined with brilliantly original dialectics.

What Jack gets from Murray is a catalogue of antidotes to terror. In a wonderful lecture that reminds us both of the diversely stocked shelves of the supermarket and of the blandly benign sound of white noise, Murray surveys the available alternatives: Jack could embrace the idea of death as a horizon that gives meaning to life, or "put [his] faith in technology" (285), or concentrate "on the life beyond" (285), or learn how to "repress" his fear more effectively (288), or become a child again, like his son Wilder. Jack's reaction underscores the paradoxical inaccessibility of all these apparently accessible strategies of salvation. " 'But these gorgeous systems are all so different,' " he protests. " 'Pick one you like,' " says Murray. " 'But you make it sound like a convenient fantasy,' " Jack responds, " 'the worst kind of self-delusion. . . . [D]on't I have to believe?' " (286). The cultural relativism that enables people to canvas a whole range of different spiritualities so weakens our faculties of belief, DeLillo suggests, that it makes commitment to any one system very difficult. The effect of Murray's blithe enumeration itself is to render each alternative somehow weightless. And the effect of his suggestion that Jack "pick one" is to turn faith itself from a practice or gift into a commodity. Murray the intellectual magician takes his place here beside the scientists, government officials, and newsmen of the novel as an apostle of magical thinking, a purveyor of spells against dread. His speech is the novel's ultimate example of white noise: the babble of the sages.

Jake falls for perhaps the most fatal magic formula Murray offers, one that has preoccupied DeLillo in all his studies of espionage and terror. When Murray has run through all the sanctioned strategies, he pauses for a moment and then offers Jack the unauthorized, "exciting" alternative, "violence [as] a form of rebirth" (290). " 'The killer,' " he explains, " 'attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life' " (291). Jack, already murderously angry at his wife's seducer, the Dylar-dispensing Willy Mink, embraces this solution avidly, only to suffer disappointment (and a gunshot wound) when he bungles the rite in a scene that is simultaneously horrifying and hilarious. Unable to live without belief, he then makes his failure the occasion for a second conversion, this time into a sentimental form of Christian piety. But this conversion doesn't stick either. Dropping the wounded Willy off at a local hospital, Jack gets into a conversation with a brilliant and heretical nun who practices a faith far too

disenchanted and demanding for him to embrace. Sister Hermann Marie, an articulate atheist, effortlessly destroys Jack's new confidence.

In the last century, when science and the new thought were making faith very difficult to sustain, Caroline Stephen, Virginia Woolf's aunt, led a movement to make silence, once again, the center of Quaker ceremonies. Stephen found that listening to any sort of religious language destroyed her capacity to believe but that this capacity was mysteriously restored, and with it her sense of community and social commitment, by silence. *White Noise* implicitly recommends a similar strategy for handling this somewhat different moment of crisis. Bereft of his ability to practice the usual forms of denial through shopping, television watching, professional preening, and the rituals of domestic life and spectacularly unsuccessful in his search for more effective alternatives, Jack finds his way at the novel's close to what might be called the church of the overpass and finds there a kind of relief. In the novel's last chapter we get a detailed and moving description of the ceremony staged, virtually every summer night, on this unlikely site:

> We go to the overpass all the time. . . . We find little to say to each other. . . . People walk up the incline and onto the overpass, carrying fruit and nuts, cool drinks, mainly the middle-aged, the elderly, some with webbed beach chairs which they set out on the sidewalk, but younger couples too, arm in arm at the rail, looking west. The sky takes on content, feeling. . . . It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel. (324)

The people who gather on the overpass are delivered out of the white noise of perpetual distraction into silence: they wait, finding "little to say[,] . . . tending toward silence" (324); "No one plays a radio or speaks in a voice that is much above a whisper" (325). They are delivered out of all sorts of false "knowledge" into a "cloud of unknowing" (290) similar to that recommended by the anonymous medieval mystical classic of the same name. "[I]t is hard to know how we should feel," Jack concludes, "most of us don't know how to feel. . . . [W]e don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means" (324). And they are delivered out of frantic activity into something like contemplation. " 'Makes me think. It really does,' " Jack testifies (227).

This scene can be read ironically, as one more example of Jack's will to

put himself under a spell. But it is also possible to read it as breaking the chain of noisy, self-inflating, and frantic scenes of self-enchantment that make the novel so wildly funny and troubling. The transformation produced at the overpass event does not in itself sponsor some new commitment, on the part of the congregants, to social responsibility. But DeLillo has already suggested that any practice of responsibility will require, as a prerequisite, some such shift. To have any chance of becoming effective citizens, Jack and his fellow Americans will need to clear their minds of the astonishing chatter of this culture and learn to deal with, rather than to deny, the dread that sponsors it. Of course there may be no escape from spells: "The sunsets linger and so do we. The sky is under a spell, powerful and storied" (325). But even so there may be, to paraphrase Joseph Conrad's Marlow, a choice of spells, with some spells leaving more room for reflection and cooperation than others, fostering something more like responsibility. *White Noise* invites us, I think, to turn away from the new Roman church of consumption and electronic chatter, and it offers us—briefly, before returning to the noisy desolation of the supermarket—a modest alternative.

Underworld: Room for the Ecstatic after All?

Underworld, like *Players*, tracks the spiritual progress of two figures who start off in roughly the same place (the Catholic ethnic communities of the Bronx) and follow very different spiritual trajectories. The first character, Nick Shay, makes his way into the sterile isolation of a familiar secular asceticism. And the second, Sister Edgar, is delivered from religious asceticism by tragedy into an intense if fleeting experience of community. By focusing on the spiritual crisis and transformation of a Cold War Catholic nun and by grounding her transformation in an experience of shared ecstatic experience, *Underworld* marks an important shift in DeLillo's religious imagination. Here, DeLillo makes peace with popular charismatic religiosity and finds within its precincts redemptive possibilities he has hitherto located only within the precincts of his improvised, spiritually subdued, congregations.

Several critics have suggested that Nick Shay himself undergoes a redemptive transformation in the course of the novel. Robert McMinn, for

instance, argues persuasively that Nick's vocation for waste containment is religiously inflected: that it echoes the mortuary rituals inscribed in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and enables Nick, eventually, to begin putting his murderous past behind him. Nick certainly thinks of his work in religious terms. "Waste is a religious thing," he explains. "We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread" (88). There's an echo, here and elsewhere in *Underworld*, of the sacralizing of recycling in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. But waste entombment is not, of course, the same as waste recycling. I'd argue, then, that DeLillo urges us to see Nick's vocation as a perversion of more authentically reverent treatment of the earth and its detritus, something more like the endless "recycling," by the media, of the already poisonous video footage of the Texas Highway Killer. It is, after all, a vocation born of and sustained by voracious consumption as well as military expediencies. Leonard Wilcox speaks of a "malign reciprocity of power and waste" in the novel's representation of the waste industry (124). And it is dedicated to making waste "safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of" (121). It sacralizes, in other words, a dread of dirt and otherness that even Nick ultimately finds intolerable. "I'll tell you what I long for," he confesses, speaking at the end of the novel from the antiseptic loneliness of his air-conditioned home in the desert city of Phoenix, "the days of disarray" (806). "I long for the days of disorder," he continues, "I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth" (810). It is a gauge of his impoverished sense of possibility that these days are imagined under the sign of violence rather than any sort of communion. For it is communion that Nick's other, Sister Edgar, finally achieves when she takes off her "latex gloves" (241) and throws herself into the unclean, messy crowd of human "losers" gathered before the miraculous billboard in the Bronx.

When the image of a raped and murdered girl appears miraculously on this billboard, Sister Edgar, who has kept a fastidious, even phobic distance from the polyglot, multiracial, and multifaithed community she serves and who has been shattered by the girl's death, decides to make a pilgrimage to the miracle site. Her decision appalls Sister Gracie, her more religiously progressive colleague:

> Gracie says, "No, please, you can't."
> "Just to see."
> "No, no, no, no."

"I want to see for myself."

"This is tabloid. This is the worst kind of tabloid superstition. It's horrible. A complete, what is it? A complete abdication." (819)

When Edgar persists, Gracie tries another, more sociological, tack. " 'This is something for poor people to confront,' " she insists. " 'The poor need visions, okay?' " (819). Sister Edgar's response is quietly devastating: " 'I believe you are patronizing the people you love' " (819), she says. " 'You say the poor. But who else would saints and angels appear to. Do saints and angels appear to bank presidents?' " (819). DeLillo suggests, here, that the progressive Church has capitulated too fully to secular modes of thinking and has lost its faith in the more-than-human. But this is of course a charge that could be laid against DeLillo himself and his various experiments in a secularized spirituality. Edgar's stern allegiance to the sacred leaves her open to possibilities that DeLillo himself has been most hesitant to affirm.

And Edgar's pilgrimage can be read as confirming these possibilities. Edgar and Gracie make the journey to the street corner site where Esmeralda has appeared superimposed on a billboard ad for Minute Maid orange juice. The billboard, partly framed by "six-ounce cans of Minute Maid," (820) depicts a bucolic scene over which is superimposed a moving display of "orange juice pouring diagonally . . . into a goblet that is handheld [by] a female caucasian of the middle suburbs" (820). There is already something "spiritual" about this image of benignant abundance. But something more has indeed been added. Standing amidst the crowd of "[w]orking people, shopkeepers, . . . drifters and . . . charismatics from the top floor of the tenement" (820), Sister Edgar sees "Esmeralda's face take shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit—less than a tender second of life, less than half a second and the spot is dark again" (822). This astonishing and absurd apparition is a hyperbolic example of the already hyperbolic popular genre of the miraculous apparition: images of saints and divinities appearing on the sides of office buildings or pieces of toast. Yet the event releases Sister Edgar not only from the corrosive despair triggered by Esmeralda's death but also from the long isolation of her religious life. She "feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy. She embraces Sister Grace. She yanks off her gloves and shakes hands, pumps hands with the great-bodied women who roll their eyes to heaven.

The women do great two-handed pump shakes, fabricated words jumping out of their mouths, trance utterance—they're singing of things outside the known deliriums" (822).

Woven finally into the very body of the community she has scorned and served, Sister Edgar is, for a moment, anyway, delivered to the kind of worldly communion celebrated in so many DeLillo novels.

Then, through a set of brisk and intricate moves, DeLillo drags her, as he drags Jack Gladney at the end of *White Noise*, back from this state of partial grace into the dominant reality of the times: into a secular system that mimics the religious in profoundly destructive ways. Jack finds himself in the supermarket, Sister Edgar in cyberspace. The first zone is equated by Murray Siskind with the cosmos of Tibetan Buddhism; the second evokes, Thomas A. Carlson argues in a brilliant essay, the cosmos of Christian mysticism. But in both zones what is offered is a desiccated, diabolically inverted version of the original, sacred space, a secular mock-up of the cosmos secularism denies and may have destroyed. Everything is connected, in cyberspace, but all connections are cold, and the only light comes from sources that have nothing to do with the divine. One can read these endings, of course, as mocking spirituality itself and writing "closed" on any hope of spiritual possibility. But I'd argue instead that they represent DeLillo's acknowledgment that such hopes must be weighed against secular culture's demonstrated power to co-opt sacred impulses, mimic sacred systems, and draw even those who glimpse other paths in its (un)holy ways.

Still, in *Underworld* DeLillo achieves a breakthrough of sorts. Long given to rejection of any form of ecstatic popular spirituality, any religion of the masses, he here suggests that these forms of preterite spirituality may in fact provide access to personally liberating and socially promising experiences of communion. Miracles may be something more than tabloid superstition; "Titanic Power" Pentecostals can come together with Catholics and others (even "Ishmaelites"); ecstatic experiences may sponsor racial and religious reconciliation as well as fanatical forms of exclusivity. (DeLillo considers the potential social benefits of such gatherings again in *Cosmopolis*. The funeral of the Sufi rapper Brutha Fez brings together "all races and styles of belief" [139] in an ecstatic experience of "communal grace" [138].)

There are, of course, no guarantees offered as to the authenticity of the experience that transforms Edgar and restores hope to her tortured community: Gracie, for one, remains skeptical, and the novel challenges the

reader to make sense of Esmeralda's apparition. "And what do you remember finally," the narrator asks. "Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces . . . ?" (824). DeLillo leaves this question open. But in *Underworld* and more recently *Cosmopolis* he comes closer than ever before to endorsing forms of ecstatic, supernaturalistic, spirituality that recall both the mass and the masses. The "whirlwind" of the human "vortex in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque" (296), a figure for all that is wrong with the religious (and with Islam) in *The Names*, finds its echo in *Cosompolis* in the whirling dervishes who dance at Brutha Fez's funeral. But the dervishes and the "whirl" (138) they figure are rendered in the latter novel as instruments of healing, and the Islamic mystic, Fez, is celebrated as a poet who "mixed language, tempos and themes" (134). DeLillo's appreciative representation of Sufism, an ancient movement within Islam, pushes back against the earlier equation of Islam with fundamentalist fervor. And it confirms the impression created in *Underworld* that he is expanding his circle of sympathy to include not only the naturalistic spiritualities of the earlier works but also more exuberantly supernaturalist and plural forms of communion.

Conclusion: Portrait of the Artist at a Cultural Turning

In *Underworld* DeLillo comes closer, as well, to speaking directly about his own commitment to writing with a "daring that goes beyond technical invention" (DeLillo, "Interview," 26) One of the most successful characters in *Underworld* is based on, and named after, the comedian Lenny Bruce. In several episodes DeLillo's Bruce, the brilliant, self-lacerating spokesman for a defiantly blasphemous mid-century artistic subculture, hurls himself with furious recklessness against the pieties of mainstream America. Then, in a crucial scene placed at the center of the novel, DeLillo has Bruce experience a crisis of conscience or a change of spirit. His evening's routine—a story about a saintly young Mexican girl trained to perform certain sexual stunts—is driving forward relentlessly to some "final grossness, . . . some epic sicko finish," the kind of "casually cruel" (632) conclusion that Bruce's audiences expect and love. But Bruce finds himself, unexpectedly, wanting

to attempt something "deeper, more challenging" (632) even if this entails "disassembling the whole structure" of his story (632). " 'Let's tell the truth this time,' " he says. " 'Let's make her human' " (632). What he seems to be reaching for, in this revisionary moment, is some unprecedented alternative both to the "easy myth[s]" (632) of American piety, with their inevitable happy endings, and the equally easy myths of the nihilistic counterculture, with their jaded cruelties and "epic sicko finish[es]." The attempt to turn toward certain positive affirmations without simply falling back into sentimental fantasies is difficult—Bruce begins immediately to lose his audience and quickly loses his way. But he persists for a while, and the story he begins to fashion links his project to that of *Underworld* itself. For the young woman he begins to see, before he gives up his effort, is none other than the one who will appear later, in DeLillo's narrative, as Esmeralda. She's a Bronx girl who "hides in the empty lots, down the maze of back alleys, because her mother's gone" (633). It is significant, surely, both that Bruce finds his way to this story and that he cannot find a name for his character, cannot even tell her story to the end. Thwarted, he breaks off and works "his way back to form" (633). His fans react enthusiastically, but he leaves the stage feeling "small and remorseful" (633).

By creating a storyteller who is fashioning a story like the one he will tell, DeLillo invites us to read the embedded episode as self-referential, to find in the representation of Bruce's impulses and swervings a representation of DeLillo's own. And there are, of course, some obvious parallels. Like the Bruce of this episode, DeLillo frequently ends his "routines" by rewriting his characters' lives, delivering them from the paths they have been following. And like this Bruce, he swerves, toward the end of his narratives, away from the cool, doomed, comedic register that is his signature style, into the less fashionable, more difficult register of the religiously inflected scenes we have been exploring. Is he trying to convey, then, something about the obscure impulses that sponsor such a turning: the impulse to offer a "deeper, more challenging" version of the real, to work in registers more noble and less dismissive than mockery and insult, to offer his audience something more like connection and care ("She's real like us" [632]) than clinical contempt? And is he coaxing readers to reflect on their own reluctance to take such a turn with him, to follow him out of the desolate security of "cool" contempt into "deeper, more challenging" imaginings?

I think DeLillo is drawing such parallels, of course. But I'm also inter-

ested in the ways the rendered scene of Bruce's humiliating failure differs from the only imaginable scene of *Underworld*'s actual production. For while Lenny is unable even to "think of a name" for his Esmeralda, let alone to fashion a tolerable story for her, DeLillo does both. He breaks through, in *Underworld*, to the place Bruce can't reach, finds the names for horror and hope, and actually tells the tale (of miracle) the comedian can't imagine. By drawing this distinction between Lenny's imagination and his own, DeLillo marks a historic transition from the stance of a certain late modernist nihilism into the curiously more humane and more hopeful sensibilities of his own postmodernist practice. I am strongly inclined to celebrate this shift, and the postsecular turn toward the religious it entails, as a victory for the human spirit, but DeLillo himself reminds us repeatedly that celebration of any sort is, at the present moment, premature.

I have almost never found anyone whose work I respected . . .
who did not talk in the vocabulary that you and I are using.
It's not the vocabulary of literary criticism.
—Toni Morrison to Gloria Naylor

3 Enclosures, Enchantments, and the Art of Discernment
Toni Morrison

It is the claim of this study that contemporary North American fiction shares with the culture at large a resurgent interest in the religious. But even as writers such as Kushner, Pynchon, and DeLillo challenge secular definitions of the real and project a spiritually charged cosmos, they also caution, as we have seen, against turning this cosmic house of the spirits into a prison house of religious dogma. Rejecting the fundamentalist drive toward social and intellectual enclosure, they attempt a reinvention of the religious like that delineated by Mircea Eliade, who, as I noted in the introduction, called for a " 'demystification in reverse' " that would affirm divine presence "without returning to a pre-critical naivete with its 'enchanted enclosure of consciousness" (Lane 19). For some contemporary thinkers, such a negotiated return is simply impossible: any return to the

religious will entail a self-diminishing mental and social incarceration. So Edward Said stipulates that "religious discourse" necessarily "serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly." This shutting off, Said continues, sponsors "organized collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous" (*World* 290). The novelists examined in this study share Said's sense of the dangers of religious discourses and modes of being. But they question the familiar binary equations deployed by Said: secular/religious: open/closed. Secularism itself, they insist, can also serve as an agent of closure, shutting off whole realms of experience and speculation. And there are forms of spiritual life and language that do not shut off inquiry or give birth to violent fervor.

Eliade's formula should alert us to a particular configuration of forces within many postsecular texts, a configuration that positions favored forms of spirituality between secular adversaries on the one hand and religious adversaries on the other. Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, for instance, proposes the martial arts Buddhism of DL Chastain as an alternative both to the consumerist culture driven by the secular sermonics of the Tube and to various forms of religious excess, ranging from the infantile delusions of certain "New Age" movements to the totalitarianism of Reaganite America's "Christian Capitalist Faith" (232). Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* challenges not only the secular claim that "there are no angels in America" (1.92) but also the contemporary cult of angels as supernatural parent-figures and the fundamentalist insistence that angelic word is law. Don DeLillo's *The Names* represents a "pilgrimage" (5) to the "temple" (381) of the Acropolis as an alternative not only to the secular practices of tourism but also to Western idealizations of the journey to the East and to the pilgrimage tradition of politically mobilized Islam. And Morrison's *Paradise*, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, portrays a convent turned coven that takes in and heals both wandering "road girls" lost in the dreams of consumerism and refugees fleeing Ruby, a community governed by Christian patriarchs.

The physical placement of emerging spiritual communities in these works bespeaks their productively uneasy relation to more dogmatic and enthusiastic forms of religious life. The need for shelter and the threat of excessive enclosure are both reflected in the sites where they form: these are at once emphatically distinct from the secular surround, closely identified

with the religious, and emphatically open, unfinished, exposed. In Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, for instance, the main characters take refuge in a ruined nunnery. This borrowed, broken, and open sacred building, lacking walls and sections of its roof, offers temporary housing to their transient and radically unorthodox monastic community. It is a place for healing and recovery, and Ondaatje leaves no doubt that its therapeutic powers are in part inherited from earlier inhabitants, ancient consecrations. But it has become, in the present, an experimental community, inhabited by individuals who make their own rules, forge their own "new testament[s]" (269), and then depart. The traditional sites of worship honored in Ondaatje's text are also dramatically porous. "At Amritsar's temple," the center of the Sikh faith, "all faiths and classes were welcome and ate together" (272). The North African desert, a home to monastics at the dawn of Christianity, now houses Almásy's "stark order" (143) of "desert Europeans" (135). It cannot, we are told, "be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names" (138). In this place of winds, of endless circulation, names are powerless to pin one down, to effect enclosure. And yet, Almásy proclaims, "it was a place of faith" (139). Indeed, "There is God only in the desert" (250).

As we've seen, the new communities that form in postsecular fiction often appropriate buildings once used by traditional churches; in text after text this appropriation bespeaks both continuity and difference, an acceptance of shelter and an implicit repudiation of the ideal of fixed religious dwelling or permanent enclosure. In Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*, Chaym Smith teaches "Taoist-drenched Tai Chi in the Christian sanctuary where generations . . . prayed to a god unknown to either Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu" (183). In Morrison's *Paradise* the women's community grows up in what was once a Catholic convent school that robbed Indian girls of their culture and faith. *Vineland*'s Kunoichi Attentives have also appropriated a nunnery for their practice, and fellow American Buddhists take refuge in forests haunted by Native American spirits. In some texts, the sites appropriated for spiritual practices are even more radically alien and open. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, townspeople gather in silent communion on a highway overpass, and in *Underworld*, they gather to at a street corner in the Bronx to worship the apparition of a slain teenager that has appeared on a billboard advertising orange juice. These images of dislocation bespeak both the precarious status of the new communities, which have no

homes, and a certain penchant, among those who gather, for openness and impermanence.

Another way in which the texts signal the in-betweeness and openness of the spiritualities they endorse is by locating sites of enabling religious energy at the edge of things. So Betonie's hogan, a site of Native American spiritual wisdom and healing in Silko's *Ceremony*, is perched on a hill at the edge of Gallup, New Mexico, with junkyards on one side and sacred mountains on the other. And so the mysterious "mentoh" who speaks for the sacred in Martinique writer Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, lives in a dark tangle of woods on the property of an oil distribution company but within reach of once sacred waterfalls. These positionings suggest, as well, of course, the possibility of some sort of reconciliation of secular and sacred modes of seeing and being. This possibility is brilliantly figured in *Angels in America*, where Tony Kushner's strange congregation, consisting of a secular Jew, a nonobservant Mormon, a recovering Protestant, and an Afro-Caribbean healer, gather under the statue of an angel in the open air of Central Park. The statue commemorates a biblical figure of miraculous healing, the angel who appears periodically at the Bethesda fountain in Jerusalem. But it also, as I pointed out in the introduction, commemorates the secular scientific institution from which Prior has received his life-prolonging AIDS medication: the Centers for Disease Control in Bethesda, Maryland. Healing is a matter of two traditions here, and the cognitive tensions between the two are less important, for the moment, than their shared contributions to health.

Toni Morrison locates postsecular possibility in similar spaces. The protagonists of *Beloved* forge a new religious community in "the Clearing," "a wide-open space cut deep in the woods" (87) beyond secular and sacred institutions alike. And the women of *Paradise* shape a new spirituality in a forgotten convent lost in the plains of Oklahoma. Set apart in these unsupervised but spiritually resonant spaces, Morrison's spiritual seekers find alternatives to conservative Christianity, the dogmatism of certain African American churches, and the hedonistic, "anything goes" ethic of secular society. They are inspired by conventionally unspeakable intuitions and gain access to worlds as richly complex in their supernaturalism as those described by James and rendered by Pynchon. And they discover spiritual practices that produce self-transformation and collective empowerment. Morrison is a champion of the spacious spiritualities they forge, but she

also insists that the very success of their seeking provokes new dangers. In both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, the intoxication of spiritual emancipation and enchantment gives rise to mortal miscalculations.

Secular Enclosure

In an interview with Christina Davis, Toni Morrison recalls her upbringing in a spiritually spacious world and a community that mingled secular canniness with a vivid relation to spiritual domains and ways. "My own use of enchantment," Morrison explains to Davis,

> simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew. In addition to the very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting. . . . They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems. (414–15)

Morrison works hard in this passage to overcome secular prejudices. She insists that the people she is describing were *both* shrewd in a "down-to-earth, efficient way" and open to spiritual encounters dismissed by secularism. They did not live enclosed in disabling superstitions or enchantments. And she insists that their spiritual practices have a more than aesthetic or anthropological appeal to her: these practices are "enchanting" and "interesting," but they are also "perceptive" and "an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems." Without such resources, Morrison continues, she herself would have been "quite bereft[,] . . . dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things" (415). But the passage also addresses, if obliquely, the question of institutional enclosure. The community described is Christian, yet it accommodates supernatural visitors generally unwelcome within the framework of normative Protestant Christianity. Morrison celebrates here, in other words, a way of being that rejects the enclosures of secularism and dogmatic Christianity alike.

This spacious spirituality is, for Morrison, not just personally but politically enabling. It is a valuable resource in the community's ongoing struggle to survive. Unfortunately, the dominant culture, with its "scientific" rhetoric, is seeking with some success to wrest this resource from African American hands. As a result, Morrison observes in an interview with Nellie McKay, "Some young people don't want to acknowledge this [traditional openness to the supernatural] as a way of life. They don't want to hark back to those embarrassing days when we were associated with 'haints' and superstitions. They want to get as far as possible into the scientific world" (409–10). Morrison's work seems designed to call such young, African American readers back from uncritical acceptance of secular paradigms. But it is designed as well, as we shall see, to alert them to the dangers of enclosure within their own traditions. In her novels, Morrison reminds her readers repeatedly that masters and slaves read the same holy text, and she takes a characteristic postmodern step in allowing history to interrogate the metaphysical system of her own Christian community so thoroughly that the system crumbles at its peak. Staring at Sethe's whip-lashed back, a character in *Beloved* muses, "Wonder what God had in mind" (80). What's interesting is how little is made of this question in the ensuing narrative. *Beloved* doesn't attempt any traditional sort of theodicy, and while blessings and miracles occur and the Bible offers valuable guidance to its inhabitants, God more or less disappears. God disappears as well in *Paradise*, of course, or is graciously dismissed: "I'll miss You," Consolata confesses. "I really will" (251).

In a fascinating 1985 interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison hints that her writing life keeps her constantly in touch with experiences like those that characterized the African American community of her childhood and formed her own sensibility. When she first began writing, she recalls, she tried to think of her relationship to the characters of her work in naturalistic terms. "I could sort of let it disguise itself as the artist's monologue with herself." But, she continues, "there's no time for that foolishness now." Now she has "overt conversations with these people" and believes that "they would not have spoken to me had I not been the one." When Naylor speaks of her own sense of being "used as a medium," Morrison welcomes the shift to an explicitly spiritual discourse: "I have almost never found anyone whose work I respected or who took their work that seriously, who did not talk in the vocabulary that you and I are using; it's not the vocabulary of literary criticism" (585–86).

Here the language of literary criticism plays the role assigned to scientific discourse in the Davis interview. It is the language of power, the official language, but it does not do full justice to the world experienced by the writer, a world that can at times be better described, and thus better negotiated, through the "discredited" language of supernaturalism. Yet just as secular criticisms of the supernatural lead some young African Americans reject their invaluable spiritual traditions, so these same criticisms condition many would-be writers to recoil in fear and embarrassment from the very experiences that might give them access to writerly power: "they don't solidify and recreate the means by which one enters into that place where those people [who become characters] are." Morrison looks forward to a time when, with more black women writing, "one will be able to talk about these things [more easily]" (586).

In the meantime, she will talk about them in her work. "I want my books," she tells Nellie McKay, "to reflect the imaginative combination of the real world, the very practical, shrewd, day-to-day functioning that black people must do," and at the same time to "encompass some great supernatural element" (409). And, she tells Tom LeClair, she will try as well to recreate the specific spiritualities of black Americans, "to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes, [the] mixture of cosmologies" produced by their fusion of African and Christian traditions (375). Morrison's appropriation of this cultural tradition of mixing produces ontological effects similar to those produced in Pynchon's fiction. By creolizing the cosmos, she affirms the supernatural while rendering any specific mapping of its population, laws, and terrain manifestly partial. DeLillo, as we've seen, achieves a similar effect by means of a rigorous reduction of the religious to a matter of mysterious interruptions and hints.

If Morrison's power as a postsecular novelist arises in part from her culturally sponsored investment in a spacious, creolized spirituality, it arises as well, as I've suggested, from her culturally grounded knowledge of the dangers of religious enclosure. An heir to a religious tradition that both supported slavery and challenged it, Morrison distrusts the religious sufficiently to find the forces of enclosure at work not only within white Christian communities but also among African American communities of faith. In *Beloved* and *Paradise*, she explores two powerful tendencies toward re-

ligious enclosure: the fundamentalist tendency latent in Christianity and the less deliberate but equally dangerous tendency to enthusiastic idealism characteristic of marginal and emergent spiritualities. She argues that certain forms of traditionally African American Christianity, by enclosing consciousness within an iron cage of absolute assertions, stifle social and spiritual energies, sympathies, and communities. And she insists that the antinomian and ecstatic spiritualities of love that are in many respects the healthy alternative to fundamentalism can produce their own sort of enclosure, not within an iron cage but within a dangerous dream of fully achieved redemption. The innovative teachings of Baby Suggs in *Beloved* and Consolata in *Paradise* produce powerfully enabling changes in their followers. But they also produce rapturous experiences of emancipation and enchantment that leave them dazzled and vulnerable. What these religious pioneers lack, Morrison suggests, is the ancient spiritual faculty of discernment. This ability to perceive distinctions and set limits is a crucial supplement to the maps and codes of organized faiths and a crucial requirement for any project of innovation. Indeed, Morrison insists, the art of discernment is as important to spiritual life, and as difficult to practice, as the art of love itself.

Arguing Exodus: *Paradise* and the Logic of Enclosure

Paradise focuses on the more extreme of the two spiritual threats to well-being explored by Morrison, that of fundamentalism. Morrison does not locate this threat, as DeLillo tends to, within culturally "alien" religions such as Islam. Rather, she discovers fundamentalist tendencies within the most revered text of her own African American, Christian community, in the story of the Exodus. This story, as related in the biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, has figured not just in African American culture, but in many others as well, as a resource for emancipatory struggle. Some years ago Michael Walzer offered, in *Exodus and Revolution*, a powerful history of its deployment as a "paradigm of revolutionary politics" (7) and a ringing defense of its utility. Walzer argued that Exodus, the foundation narrative of biblical Israel, has been an influential model for radical struggle in the West, one preferable in every respect to more apocalyptic models derived from the New Testament. The

value of the Exodus narrative as a model for change, Walzer argued, lies both in its representation of liberation as God's will for humanity and in its chastening representation of the liberation process. Far from imagining liberation as a project of easy and absolute transformation, Exodus depicts it as a vexed process guided and partially derailed by all-too-human beings, one that achieves, at best, limited, this-worldly improvements.

Walzer's argument, which celebrated the use of Exodus by American revolutionaries in the eighteenth century and civil rights activists in the twentieth, drew a sharp response from Edward Said. In an essay with the brilliantly laconic title, "Michael Walzer's 'Exodus and Revolution': A Canaanite Reading," Said, a Palestinian, pointed out that the biblical Exodus narrative climaxes (in the book of Joshua) with a divinely ordained campaign of conquest entailing genocide or ethnic cleansing (91). On God's orders, the Israelites, so recently slaves in Egypt, exterminate (or, in another version, drive out) the Canaanites and level their cities to the ground.

Morrison's assessment of Exodus takes account both of its enabling aspects and of its shortcomings as a guide for social transformation, in a way that reflects her situation as an African American. Her community has made brilliant use of the Exodus narrative to survive slavery, kindle strength for struggle, and brave the risks of escape and later migration from zones of servitude. By the 1840s, Eddie Glaude observes, the metaphors of Exodus "had become the predominant political language of African Americans." Indeed, the "narrative was the taken-for-granted context for any discussion of slavery and freedom" (126). "Exodus functioned," Albert Raboteau writes, "as an archetypal event for the slaves"; there was no part of the Bible with which they were more familiar (311). In the decades after Reconstruction, Exodus continued to shape dreams of full emancipation. It helped inspire, as *Paradise* indicates, both the post-Reconstruction migrations from the South to Kansas and Oklahoma and the "great migrations" northward during the years around World War I and II. The titles of recent studies of these migrations—Lemann's *The Promised Land*, Sernett's *Bound for the Promised Land*, and Rodgers's *Canaan Bound*—testify to its ubiquity as model and inspiration.

And yet Exodus has had its critics within the African American community. In "Exodus Piety," David Wills finds a tradition of uneasiness with the Exodus model that dates back to at least the 1880s. The arguments of the time anticipate Morrison's in *Paradise*: Exodus, one AME missionary writes,

played a powerful role in the struggle against slavery. But "the analogy no longer ought to define the church's sense of itself," for the text's fierce ethnic exclusivism is at odds with the larger Christian message: " 'Christianity can tend to but one end. . . . There can be no nationality or race discriminating influences attached to it' " (154–55).

This challenge to the adequacy of an Exodus-dominated African American Christianity is renewed in *Paradise*. Indeed, the novel could be read as a constructively critical supplement to an influential work by Morrison's colleague at Princeton, the African American theologian Cornel West. In *Race Matters* (1993), West discovers a powerful strand of nihilism in African American culture and in American civilization as a whole. He designates as nihilistic the profound disorientation, aimlessness, and hopelessness that, he claims, blights the lives of many African Americans. This nihilism has its roots in the experience of slavery, West argues, but it has flourished with the triumph, since the sixties, of "market values" such as "consumerism and hedonism" (84). It fosters all sorts of evils within the African American community, including the injustices of "black male power exercised over black women" (37). It must be addressed, he insists, not only with a traditional politics of social reform but also with a "*politics of conversion*" (29, emphasis in the original).

All of these aspects of West's argument, and more, resonate with Morrison's own preoccupations, analyses, and prescriptions, as they emerge in *Paradise*. But West goes on to assert that the African American church has been and continues to be a chief instrument of efforts to check the "nihilistic threat" to black America (22) and produce a conversion to an ethics of love and solidarity. "At present," he writes, "the major institutional bulwarks against the pervasive meaninglessness and despair in Afro-America are intermediate institutions such as Christian churches. . . . They are all fighting an uphill battle[,] . . . [y]et . . . are beacons of hope" (87–88). Morrison has repeatedly celebrated the African American church, both in her fiction and in essays and interviews. She, too, represents it—in *Beloved*, for instance—as the priceless "armor" (West 23) of African Americans. But in *Paradise*, she looks beneath the armor and discovers that at least one church community has made something very dangerous of the Exodus piety at the core of African American Christianity. In Ruby, a town founded by African Americans fleeing the South, the great work of the Exodus journey is in the past, the promised land has been bloodlessly secured

in Oklahoma, and now the community's male leaders are dedicated to realizing another aspect of the biblical Exodus project, the establishment, among believers, of a starkly exclusive, rigidly hierarchical, and firmly patriarchal society. Morrison's Exodus, then, sponsors both liberation and fundamentalism. And her African American church is both a crucible of faithful struggle and an incubator of its own, homegrown, nihilisms. Thus although Morrison has much more time for Exodus than Said does, *Paradise* might plausibly be subtitled "Exodus, a Womanist Reading."

Because Morrison's reading of the Exodus, like Said's, draws on aspects of the full narrative that often go unmentioned in discussions of its liberatory power, a brief review of the biblical narrative may be in order. The story opens with a great deliverance, as the Israelites, freed by God from Egyptian slavery, are set in motion toward the land promised centuries ago to their ancestor Abraham. God, imagining his people as a "holy nation" (Exodus 19:5), at first dictates only a few, morally generous, demands. But as the people repeatedly demonstrate that they are not ready to obey their Liberator, God multiplies his commandments. Pressing further into the details of daily and cultic life, he institutes harsher and harsher prohibitions against dissent, proscribes cultural exchange with neighboring peoples, and establishes an hereditary male priesthood to govern Israel in perpetuity. Even the promise of the Promised Land is now hedged about with conditions. The Israelites, God warns, must not "come . . . among [the] nations" or "make marriages with them." If they do, he "will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you" (Joshua 23:7, 12–13 [Authorized King James Version]). Nor must the Israelites permit the community itself to be contaminated by dissent or alternative spiritual practices: "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, . . . [t]hou shalt not . . . pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be the first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people" (Deuteronomy 13:6–9). Finally and most chillingly, given the themes of *Paradise*, there is this simple edict: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18).

Paradise reminds us that such calls for violently inscribed and main-

tained enclosure are as much a part of the biblical narrative at the center of the African American church as is God's call to "Let my people go" (Exodus 7:16) As a provocative symbol of this fact, Morrison places a large public oven at the center of the Exodus-oriented town of Ruby. The oven, once used to bake the bread of daily life, is intended by the community's elders to serve as an iconic reminder of the town's long march to autonomy and solidarity under God. But it suggests other things as well, including, in this text centered on a massacre, the Holocaust. Genocidal impulses, Morrison's oven hints, reside at the heart of the very biblical narrative identified with escape from extermination, and they are likely to infect any community that embraces that narrative uncritically. If there is a path leading away from nihilistic denials of the human, then, it is not in any simple sense the one charted by the ancient biblical narrative that once served the African American church so well.

An Exodus to (and from) Fundamentalism

Exodus narratives proliferate in *Paradise*. The people now living in Ruby, like their ancestors, know the original narrative by heart: the Bible, with its stories of "great migrations" is a book they have "made . . . their own" (110–11). They are descendants of ex-slaves who migrated from Louisiana and Mississippi to Oklahoma after Reconstruction, and the town elders are veterans of a second Exodus, from Haven, Oklahoma, to Ruby itself. Once upon a time, the community's exodus story goes, a proud people, schooled in freedom, trekked out of the South to avoid the second enslavement of the post-Reconstruction era. They were guided in their exodus by wise leaders, prayer, and miraculous beings. A mysterious "walking man," the answer to the wandering families' prayers, led them through the wilderness to Haven: "He is with us," Zechariah Morgan proclaimed, echoing Exodus, "He is leading the way" (97). The stories of this heroic journey, and of the more recent journey from Haven to Ruby, draw on, supplement, and confirm the original biblical narrative until this composite Exodus narrative becomes the "controlling" (13) story of Ruby's collective life.

But what is affirmed in these stories, and lived out in Ruby, is not only emancipation. The community's fierce commitment to a sacred text, to its promise of a place of "permanent happiness" (306), and to the practices

of obedience and exclusion it prescribes for the realization of that promise sponsor crushing forms of enclosure. The spirit of risk and receptivity that redeemed the community in its founding moments has passed, and the people of Ruby, like those of the community depicted in Exodus, are governed, in the novel's present, by a hierarchy of patriarchs—actual "priests" in the form of its two traditional ministers as well as "elders" like Deacon and Steward Morgan, whose very names identify them with holy office. These theocrats rule the town, enforcing its strict codes, rebuking and punishing transgressors, silencing all those (women and youths) who lack their authority and leading the attack on the unholy women on its borders. The purity they celebrate, like that celebrated in Exodus, is ethnic as well as religious. In the name of purity ("God bless the pure and holy" [142]), they establish "blood rules" (196), exiling or marginalizing all who are not black enough to pass muster in a community of "eight-rock" (193), that is, very dark, African Americans. And in the name of purity, they conspire to massacre or expel the neighboring community of self-governing, racially mixed women who violate their sense of divine order, sexual virtue, and female decorum. "Who will protect them from their leaders?" the town's third minister, Reverend Misner asks (306). And in the wake of the massacre at the convent, the townspeople themselves wonder how "could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped," yet another house of bondage (292)?

Although Morrison centers her indictment of Ruby's religiosity around an act of horrific physical violence, she is at least as interested in exposing the hermeneutical violence of the town's spiritual leaders. Ruby's males, fathers and sons, battle over the partially effaced text inscribed on the oven (" . . . the Furrow of His Brow" [86]), with each party filling out the inscription in ways that suit their inclinations: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" or "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (87). Ruby's women, prohibited from participation in the public debate, reject the whole notion of single, inerrant readings. Pat Best concludes that the text has "multiple meanings (195), and Dovey Morgan is ready to accept it as it stands, without the violence of any imperative: " 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'? 'Be the Furrow of His Brow'? Her own opinion was that 'Furrow of His Brow' alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross" (93). Hovering at the edge of Dovey

Morgan's musings is the suggestion that the men of Ruby, in seeking to fix the meaning of the partially effaced and powerfully evocative phrase, repeat the unspeakable violence of the crucifixion. In the name of religious rectitude, they murder Jesus, the Living Word. Steward Morgan's threat drives home the relation between this sort of hermeneutical violence and the violent actions of Ruby's patriarchs. "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (87). Steward's words, which paraphrase the threat that closes the Christian Bible—"if any man shall add unto [or] take away from the words of the book . . . God shall take away his part out of the book of life" (Revelation 22:18–19)—signal once again that this violence is rooted, however problematically, in the sacred texts of Christianity.

Even as Morrison draws lines out from scripture to the fundamentalist practices of hermeneutical and social violence that ruin Ruby's quest for peace, she calls attention as well to what Michel Foucault would call the biopolitical violence of the community's theocratic order, its ruinous shaping of the intimate desires and practices of the subjects it governs. By juxtaposing public debates over the meaning of the oven's inscription with scenes of married life in Ruby, she suggests that the fundamentalist model of communication, with its unquestionable laws and leaders, not only denies the ambiguity of sacred texts and cripples public exchange but also stifles intimacy and thwarts the self-questioning flow of thought itself, cutting off inner development. In a world where women are systematically excluded from public power and even participation (as they are in the Exodus community), a silence falls between husbands and wives and, at an even deeper level, within the minds of both. So Steward and Dovey, Deacon and Soane, drift apart, fashioning separate lives, following separate desires, and failing to support or correct each other in their increasingly solitary endeavors.

The violence of Ruby's sacred system takes its toll in another way as well. The elders' fiercely prescriptive and proscriptive codes rob transgression of its heuristic possibilities, leaving no room for the sort of erring that enables people to grow in knowledge and responsibility. Such productive erring unfolds through a potentially creative dynamic of transgression, reflection, and reform, but fundamentalism substitutes for this open-ended pattern a pernicious cycle of desperate violation and momentary liberation, followed

swiftly by withering self-condemnation and violent reaction. So Deacon Morgan, whose illicit love for Consolata might in other circumstances have been ethically productive, allows this love to be judged, in the end, by the unmerciful codes of his faith, and winds up despising her and condemning himself.

These criticisms of fundamentalist forms of thought are at least potentially the common property of its religious and secular opponents alike. But the novel's most emphatic charge against Exodus fundamentalism is a spiritual one. In its attempt to limit revelation, cut off interpretation, seal scripture, and formulate its doctrines of the one and only God or set of gods, Morrison insists, fundamentalism commits a crime against the spirit and the spirits. This is, for instance, the crime at the heart of the bloody massacre at the convent. Innocent persons are killed (or so it seems), and this is terrible. But at the crucial moment in the kitchen, when Steward Morgan raises his gun to silence Consolata, something else is at stake. Confronting the murderous vigilantes in the convent's kitchen, Consolata suddenly breaks into a luminous smile. "You're back," she exclaims, addressing someone, perhaps the god who visits her regularly. Steward Morgan, "who saw nothing or everything," will have none of this. He executes her before she can share her vision "lest they [all] know another realm" (301), as his brother Deacon realizes. The most evil closing off effected by fundamentalism, Morrison suggests here, is the closing off of other realms, those of the very gods or God with whom it is humans' destiny, and delight, to be reconciled.

So it is, in Ruby and its surround, that spiritual life flourishes largely in spite of institutional religion rather than because of it. All through the novel, people (mostly women) are having experiences that are not authorized by the town's sacred texts. So Consolata, at a moment of mortal crisis, brackets her allegiance to the mother superior and to Catholic dogma and learns a forbidden healing art from the outsider, Lone DuPres. And so it is, later on, that at a moment of spiritual crisis, when her faith fails and she renounces the Christian God she has never met, another god immediately appears (251) and she comes back to spiritual life. Sharing this life outside the law with her charges at the convent, she rescues them from nihilistic drift, heals body and spirit, and even renders them, in some strange way, impervious to assassination.

The god Consolata encounters, the healings she and her teacher Lone

DuPres offer, resemble, as critics have noted, those identified with Candomblé, the Brazilian religion that draws both on African sacred traditions and on Catholicism (Bouson, 238n.). One way to read *Paradise*, then, would be as a postcolonial narrative of recovery and return, a triumphant story of the resurgence, in spite of Protestant preachers and Catholic missionaries, of an older knowledge and human-divine community. Morrison insists that such a recovery would indeed be salutary, for Candomblé and the ancient healing traditions of Lone DuPres reject the mind/body, spirit/flesh dualisms of certain traditions in Western thought. "In my faith," the still orthodox Consolata proclaims to Lone DuPres, "faith is all I need." Lone will have none of this. "You need what we all need," she responds, "earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world" (244). Soon Consolata is preaching a similar vision of things. "Never break" the spirit and the flesh "in two," she counsels. "Never put one over the other" (263). The healing practices she devises for the road girls assume the reciprocal relatedness of body and mind, spirit and flesh; they seem more effective than those of Western secular and religious traditions alike.

Indeed, it is only when Consolata "converts" from Catholicism to these alternative traditions that she is able to address the nihilism of the young women gathered at the convent and to save them. They have been abandoned, berated, beaten, and exploited. They are, as the novel insists repeatedly, the carriers and victims of the hedonistic culture of consumption excoriated by Cornel West. They have been filled with the "babygirl dreams" (222) of ready happiness pedaled by popular culture. So even when they dream of an exodus from present miseries, the form taken by their dreams is that of an easy trip to one of the many pleasure spots marked out by ads and the movies as America's promised lands. Mavis imagines California as a sort of Promised Land; Gigi locates her dream of perpetual sexual gratification in a fictitious town called Wish, Arizona, and Pallas runs away with her boyfriend to join her criminally self-absorbed mother in the New Age capital of Taos, New Mexico. Disappointed in these ventures at ready redemption, they drift into the convent and regress into a kind of infantilized self-absorption from which they are rescued, at last, by Consolata. After her encounter with the god in the garden, she acquires a stature and wisdom she has not had, and when she tells the girls that they must either "follow" her (262) or leave, they assent to the rigorous therapeutic exercises that she

improvises in the cellar. *Paradise* complicates West's argument in *Race Matters*, then, not only by insisting that some African American churches need to shed their own scripturally sustained forms of despotism and nihilism and recover a living relation to the spirit but also by suggesting that other religious traditions—with different cosmologies, different rituals, different understandings of Paradise—may be better prepared to heal the psychic and physical wounds of the day than Christianity.

But even as Morrison insists that there are powerful and legitimate alternatives to Christian cosmology, she acknowledges the possibilities for rebirth within Christianity itself. The faith of Ruby was once a living faith: prayer elicited protection and guidance for the wilderness-crossing founders. And it seems poised, at the end of the novel, for possible rebirth. Reverend Misner, a Baptist and an outsider in Ruby, resists the dogmatism of the other patriarchs. And he remains so close to the personal God at the center of what Harold Bloom calls "the American Religion" (15) that when he is "in His company," he can "hear the light breathing of his companion" (161). (The Baptists, Bloom reminds us, "speak, sing, pray about walking with Jesus" [40]). This contact with "fresh upspringings" of the spirit promises to invigorate his ministry. At the same time, the promise it represents seems at first to be checked because Misner's general orientation, to borrow a phrase from the Quaker mystic, Thomas Kelly, remains "externally rationalistic, humanistic, and service-minded"—cut off from the full tutelage and invigoration of the spirit (7). Or it does so until he receives, on the killing fields of the convent, a glimpse of "another realm."

Morrison's treatment of this crucial event is psychologically brilliant. Misner's first response to the vision is a sophisticated sort of denial. As he stands in the field with Anna Flood, his fiancée, suddenly,

> they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door, she said later. "No, a window," he said, laughing. "That's the difference between us. You see a door; I see a window."
>
> Anna laughed too. They expanded on the subject: What did a door mean? What a window? focusing on the sign rather than the event; excited by the invitation rather than the party. They knew it was there. Knew it so well they were transfixed for a long moment before they backed away and ran to the car. . . . Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? (305)

It would appear that Misner, like Steward Morgan, will opt for enclosure, refusing the invitation to see another realm not with violence but with an anxious and worldly flourish of rhetorical skill. Yet his words do not produce the intended closure. Presiding at a funeral shortly after the vision in the field, Misner finds himself in an all-too-familiar position, groping for verbal traction before a congregation of people whom he cannot reach or move. "Misner was losing them; they stood before the open grave closed to everything but their own musings" (307). At this moment of crisis, perhaps because the open grave reminds him of the open window, perhaps because he recognizes himself in his spiritually "closed" audience, he sees again "the window in the garden" and feels "it beckon toward another place—neither life nor death—but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had" (307). Accepting this invitation, glimpsing this other place that exists in a space unknown to him from any map, secular or spiritual, he testifies with conviction to redemptive realities denied by secularism and reduced by secularized Christianity to mere script(ure). "He is with us always," Misner declares, "in life, after it, and especially in between, lying in wait for us to know the splendor" (307). These "words embarrassed him a little," we are told, "but on that day, nothing had ever been clearer" (307). The phrase "on that day," arrests any impulse we might have to inscribe Misner's words on another oven. But it insists, at the same time, as Morrison does in her interviews, that such experiences and proclamations are authentic mysteries, resources for living foreclosed alike by secular denial and fundamentalist dogma.

Misner is Cornel West's kind of Christian, and by authorizing him Morrison acknowledges that the African American church still retains the potential to do the kind of work West would like to have it do. But Misner remains a minority of one (or, with Deacon Morgan's public act of contrition, two) within the male elite of Ruby's churches. In addition, of course, the "He" Misner affirms is almost certainly not the "You" Consolata greets at the moment of her death. Ultimately, then, *Paradise* endorses (but does not demand) an exodus from the monotheistic terrain of traditional Christianity into the spacious beckoning wilderness of that radical ontological pluralism sketched out by William James.

Ann-Janine Morey captures the drift of Morrison's postsecular argument concisely in a useful essay on postmodernism and the scholarly field of religion and literature. In their fiction, she writes, Morrison and other religiously inclined contemporary women writers interrogate "the conven-

tions of western Christianity without necessarily establishing any alternative utopic promises. . . . Christ and Christianity are not denied or erased but rather displaced and relocated. . . . Jesus can be seen as just one of the gods in a world of transience and uncertainty" (251). I'd argue, of course, that the dialectic Morey traces so succinctly characterizes contemporary postsecular fiction by men and women alike. Everywhere, we find writers working to partialize religious claims, to interrogate utopian promises of full redemption, and to emphasize "transience and uncertainty."

Enchanted Enclosures and the Art of Discernment in *Beloved*

While Morrison's chief focus, in *Paradise*, is on the mental, spiritual, and social enclosures produced by Ruby's Exodus-based fundamentalism, the novel also exposes a very different sort of spiritual "enclosure of consciousness," this one linked not to a discourse of law but to the enchanting power of a new, syncretic, Earth-positive and sensuous spirituality. The practices improvised by Consolata under the tutelage of a range of spiritual guides—from a Catholic mother superior to an aged healer and herbalist, from Christ to a god out of the pantheon of Brazilian Candomblé—enable the "road girls" who collect at the convent to begin to recover from their ideological, psychological, and physical wounds. But in the first blush of gratitude and satisfaction, the women make a fatal error. Brimming with joy in the wake of their work with Consolata, they experience, one afternoon, "the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain." "They would have laughed," the narrator observes, "had enchantment not been so deep" (283). But this very condition of rapturous enchantment washes away their "recollections of . . . warning" and "intimations of harm" (283). They refuse to believe, even when Lone DuPres tells them, that they might still be "hunted" (266) by the people, mostly male, who have preyed on them. As a result, they are fatally unprepared when Ruby's murderous vigilantes burst in on their sanctuary.

Jane Bennett's definition of the visceral experience of enchantment can help us see the dynamics of this error more clearly. "Enchantment," she writes, involves "a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under *the momentary impression* that the natural and

cultural worlds *offer gifts*" (156, first emphasis mine). Bennett's cogent definition highlights at once the power of enchantment and its characteristic ephemerality. But just as certain religious systems seem to be the expression of a profound sense of guilt and unworthiness, and to shape an entire cosmos in terms of that intuition, so others (transcendentalism, for instance, or some of the New Age philosophies that draw on it) seem to be enchanted by enchantment and to represent the cosmos in its light, as a domain of pure affirmation and abundance, all gift, no grind. Other spiritual discourses take only a slight distance from this perspective, stipulating that history has brought us to the very frontier of a thoroughly benign world, into which we will pass without further strife, as soon as we see the light. In each case, one might argue, a certain reduction of the real has been effected and a necessary balance has been lost. Evelyn Waugh once described the Catholic Church as "a brotherhood [sic] who can both rejoice and recognize the limits of rejoicing" (Elie 181). Enraptured by the real but limited gifts of the spirit, Morrison's women lose sight of the world beyond rejoicing, and this experience of ecstatic enclosure costs them dearly.

The perils of enchanted enclosure briefly thematized in *Paradise* are more fully delineated in Morrison's *Beloved*. Enchanted enclosures are everywhere in the novel. Sweet Home, the plantation where Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D, and a host of other characters live for years, is itself the improbable product of a slaveholder's enchantment. Mr. Garner, a slave-owning Southerner surrounded by fellow citizens capable of the worst sort of inhumanity, acts "like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with" (139). He treats his slaves with a modicum of respect, and they live "isolated in a wonderful lie" (221) until he dies and his sadistic successor, the Schoolteacher, recalls them to the truth of their status. The woodland clearing where Baby Suggs instructs her congregation in freedom seems at first the very antithesis to slavery's enclosures, and in supremely important ways, it is. Yet it too is a site of dangerous enchantment, forged by a "good woman" (254) who, like Mr. Garner, gets carried away by her dreams. And the house at 124 Bluestone Road, dedicated to Sethe's dream of reconciliation with the murderous past, becomes yet another site of disabling enchantment. Each place is the product of a well-intentioned and necessary project of opening—racial opening at Sweet Home, the opening of wounded hearts at the "wide-open place" called the "Clearing" (87), and the opening of the present to the past, the human world to the world of spirits

at 124 Bluestone Road. But in each case the impulse to opening fosters, in its very unfolding, illusions of limitless peace and freedom, blinding those caught up in the project to real dangers and sponsoring terrible setbacks.

So it is that Baby Suggs, the unchurched preacher who brings her congregation of escaped slaves back to life, also exposes them to new experiences of mortification. In the exhilaration of freedom, this "unchurched" and "[u]ncalled, unrobed, unanointed" woman preacher (87) proclaims her bold new gospel to her traumatized African American neighbors in a settlement outside Cincinnati, Ohio**.** The power she radiates is not hers alone, not simply an effect of personality. She is inspired to speak by "[h]er faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart" (89). "The Word had been given to her" (178), muses Stamp Paid. She is "the center of things" and "she always knows exactly what to do and when[.] Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing" (137).

Baby Suggs's unorthodox word is designed to restore a capacity for self-love and love of others that has been all but annihilated, Morrison suggests, by slavery.

> She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.
>
> She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.
>
> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it." (88)

In order to love, Baby Suggs further argues, her people must not only affirm the bodies they have been taught (by racism and by certain strands of Christian doctrine) to despise; they must also lay down the weapons they have used to defend themselves against the horrors of slavery: their "heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt" (86). She recommends this course of unilateral disarmament in words that echo a famous spiritual: "Lay em down . . . Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more" (86). This simple injunction takes on a whole range of meanings as the novel unfolds. It represents a call to stop fighting—violently, anyway—against a

white community that is simply too powerful and too abysmally ruthless to defeat. (" 'Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout' " [244].) But it is most emphatically a call to lay down psychological shields employed, at a terrible price, to protect the deepest levels of the self against the even more terrible humiliations, heartbreaks, and powerless rages of slavery.

Since these humiliations have been experienced, and have been registered at some level in one's mind and on one's body, and since the armor that protects one against their conscious registration also makes it impossible, in Morrison's account, to access other, more productive, feelings, Baby Suggs encourages her people to allow the memories their moment of full expression in the hope that they can be "cleared." In the security of the Clearing, she encourages her flock to laugh, to dance, to cry, and to sing. Under her tutelage, people sealed from self and others begin to recover connection with their own feelings and with each other: "With Baby Suggs' heart in charge, the people let go" (94). Over time, something like the beloved community of scripture begins to crystallize in the Clearing, at the house at 124 Bluestone that she opens to all, and in the black community as a whole.

In the course of her teachings, Baby Suggs pauses, on occasion, to remind her congregation of the need for discernment. Even as she calls for her congregation to love their flesh and lay down their arms, she reminds them that such injunctions can be taken too far: " 'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop' " (87). These are wise words, but in the enthusiasm of the moment, they have little purchase. Indeed, *Beloved* is a text in which just about everyone goes too far, not only "white-people," who "don't know when to stop" in the most horrific ways (104), but black people as well, who exceed the mark in their dreams and defense of freedom. Dreaming of a black community linked—the living and the dead—by love, believing that the heart's "grace" can effect this fusion, and exhilarated by the miraculous escape of her son's children, Baby Suggs overestimates both the moral maturity of her community and the protection granted by the spirits. The feast she provides in an act of "reckless generosity" (137) offends her followers: she has "overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (138). It has immediate and terrible consequences. The offended community does not warn Baby Suggs as the slave catchers approach, and Baby Suggs, her sixth sense distracted by "the smell of disapproval," does not clearly discern "the

other thing . . . [d]ark and coming"—the approach of the slave catchers (138). So Sethe, cornered, tries to kill her children and herself, and peoples' lives, homes, and the community itself are shattered. Baby Suggs, feeling "mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard" (177), repudiates her own teachings: "There was no grace," she concludes, "and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that" (89). *Beloved* will prove her wrong but only to a degree. In the meantime, it invites us to contemplate the terrible price that can be exacted, in a brutal world, for the most innocent excesses of enchantment.

It is the false clarity produced by rapturous enchantment—its abolition of obscurities and complexities—that encloses Morrison's believers here, much as the false clarity of fundamentalism's chillier enchantments encloses Ruby's citizens. The biblical art designed to protect people from such errors is the art of discernment ("*diakrisis*"). This art enters Christian discourse through the New Testament Epistles traditionally ascribed to the apostle Paul. *Beloved* is of course in perpetual conversation with Paul; it takes its title, its epigram, and the name of its male protagonist from his letters, and it shares Paul's preoccupation with questions of love, the flesh, free will, and the relation of law to revelation. Discernment, as Paul and other biblical authors describe it, is a faculty made necessary by the abstract nature of divine law, which must always be interpreted when applied, and the fallen nature of the creation, which condemns humans to grope for the truth in a domain dense with deception. It entails both the skillful interpretation and application of God's spoken ordinances and the accurate assessment of spirits, which may be either demonic of benign. ("Beloved," reads the First Letter of John, "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" [1 John 4:1].) Discernment assumes, in other words, that things, including spiritual things, are stubbornly opaque and sometimes malignant. And it schools believers in the arts of trenchant analysis and application. In the Morrison's creolized cosmos, where different divinities speak different languages, and no one language can enclose all of the real, it is an even more essential skill.

The Pauline letters caution that the art of discernment is a difficult one, slowly learned. Spiritual beginners are "babes" or "infants," and it is only by "reason of use" that humans "have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:12–14). One of the most bitter ironies in *Beloved* is that the fiercest ordeals of discernment are endured by a figure whose

preparation in the art is virtually nonexistent. Sethe, like many contemporary seekers, is a "babe" taught by a "Baby": no one but Baby Suggs has taken any interest in her spiritual instruction, and as an African American and a woman she has been doubly denied practice in independent thought and judgment. Yet it falls to her—armed only with Baby Suggs's guiding precepts—first to face Schoolteacher when he comes for her children and then to face Beloved when she comes from the other world to claim a place in Sethe's home. On the first occasion, when the slave catchers come for her and her children, Sethe has no time for measured deliberation. But it is clear that she has Baby Suggs's teaching, her call for the congregation to "love all [their] parts" (88), on her mind: "if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, *all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful*, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (163, emphasis mine). Tragically, at this moment of white-sponsored terror Sethe forgets the rest of Baby Suggs's teachings or allows her desperate love to overrule them. She does not lay down sword and shield, and she does not, arguably, know when to stop. Overcome by a horror and driven by a love that may well be, as Paul D claims, "too thick" (164), she reacts by trying to kill her children with a rusty saw, traumatizing the three who survive and dispatching the spirit of the fourth to a timeless limbo of bitter longing.

Sethe's second ordeal of discernment entails an actual "discernment of spirits." In the bleak years after her crime and Baby Suggs's death, she is called on to decide how to understand and treat three "apparitions": those of her old friend Paul D, of the ghost that haunts 124 Blackstone, and of the young woman, Beloved, who appears there, as it were, in the flesh. In each case, Sethe risks giving her heart and soul to a being who may or may not deserve such a gift. To choose well, she must determine where the apparition comes from, what it is and wants, what it offers in the way of trouble or assistance. And in each case, Sethe turns to Baby Suggs's teaching for assistance, asks her, or her still living spirit, for "a clue . . . . as to what she should do" (89), "some clarifying word; some advice about how to keep on" (95). Once again, however, the consequences of Sethe's efforts at discernment are anything but reassuring. If Sethe does ultimately and correctly come to see "the thing in [Paul D], the blessedness" (272), she achieves no such clear vision of the ghostly presence and the girl called

Beloved. And if her attempts to "take [Baby Suggs's] advice: *to lay it all down, sword and shield*" (173, emphasis in original) do enable her to work out her relation to Paul D, they get her in terrible trouble with the other visitor who shows up at 124 Bluestone Road.

In a crucial episode that can be read as a kind of ordeal of discernment, Sethe takes herself, Denver, and Beloved back to the Clearing where Baby Suggs once taught in order to decide what to do about Paul D. Petitioning the spirit of Baby Suggs for consolation and advice, she feels "caressing fingers" (95) on her neck, fingers she takes to be Baby Suggs's. But then these spectral fingers begin to strangle her; they press so hard that she emerges with bruises on her neck. As Beloved strokes the bruises, Sethe's thoughts turn away from Paul D and Baby Suggs to the strange young woman at her side: "Beloved's fingers," she finds, "were heavenly. Under them . . . [t]he peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her" (97). It's only after she leaves the Clearing that she glimpses the truth. Walking "in the dappled tree-light, clearer-headed now—away from the enchantment of the Clearing" (98), she realizes that Baby Suggs has not tried to strangle her, figures out that she wants Paul D, and realizes, but only for a second, that Beloved's fingers were the ones tightening around her throat. The very density of the drama of decision, and the mixed results achieved, testify to the difficulty of the art of discerning the spirits. And Morrison's play with the notion of clearing is instructive as well. It is only when she has taken a distance from the "enchantment of the Clearing" that Sethe begins to think clearly. The site and the arts of ecstatic opening it symbolizes are here marked as dangerously antagonistic to discernment.

If Baby Suggs seems unable to offer Sethe any direct help, from the other side, in discerning spirits, her remembered teachings also prove inadequate. Beloved's identity is in question from the start (and has generated a substantial critical debate). While some characters see Beloved as an ordinary person and others see her as a ghost or devil-child, first Denver and then Sethe decide that Beloved's appearance represents a "miraculous resurrection" (105) of Sethe's slain daughter. The scene in which Sethe finally "recognizes" Beloved unfolds as a kind of wintery version of the summer ceremonies in the Clearing: Sethe, Denver, and Beloved put down their chores, choose for pleasure, and do some dancing, some crying, some laughing, and some singing on a frozen creek in the woods. This informal celebration produces a kind of enchantment—revitalization, solidarity, and "clearing."

The women, forged into a tight family of three, return home exhausted but deliciously relaxed. It's at this point that Sethe experiences a kind of illumination: a "settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them" (175). The pieces are the accumulating clues to Beloved's identity, clues that now come together in Sethe's enchanted mind to produce conviction. But they are also the human pieces of the family forged on the ice, a unit that will close itself off completely from the larger community.

Sethe reaches the decision to embrace Beloved as her lost daughter by finally resolving to follow Baby Suggs's advice and "*lay it all down, sword and shield*" (173), to surrender to the enchantments of love, set aside all psychic and cognitive defenses, and accept Beloved's coming as a blessed return of a needy and loving spirit. She believes that with this decision she has been saved, but the text suggests otherwise. Out on the ice, the narrator reports, Sethe repeatedly loses "her balance" and falls (174). Perhaps "the conclusion [Sethe] had . . . leapt to" (181), her identification of Beloved as a loving daughter, is wrong.

This suggestion is borne out by subsequent events. Beloved, who has already driven Paul D from the house, now contrives to "cut out" Denver and to keep Sethe permanently at home. So begins a terrible spiraling down into abjection, recrimination, and rage. Beloved's appetites are unappeasable: "when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (240). But she will not give Sethe the one thing she wants: "Sethe pleaded for forgiveness. . . . Beloved denied it" (241–42). The house becomes the site of "furious arguments" (239). So much for Sethe's all-too-wishful identification of Beloved as a loving daughter; so much for her readiness to put down sword and shield and turn her house over to enchanting spirits. Beloved may indeed be her daughter in some form, but she is a greedy, spiteful, vengeful presence, what the Buddhists would call a "hungry ghost." And she is something "more" (266) as well; her memories include the horrors of the Middle Passage, which Sethe's infant daughter never knew. Thus Sethe's all too understandable failure of discernment opens her to a spiritual realm of pain and rage far beyond her powers of assuagement.

The catastrophic consequences of Sethe's surrender to Beloved not only highlight the dangers of enchantment and the difficulties of discernment but also call Baby Suggs's maxims into question. If Sethe errs, when the slave catchers come across the river into her yard, by refusing to follow Baby Suggs's advice to lay down sword and shield, she errs again, arguably,

by "trying to take her advice" (173) when Beloved comes out of the river into her yard. The call for disarmament, the novel suggests, is simply too sweeping, too much a matter of enchantment's one-sided view of things, to be of use. This theme is reinforced by the representation of Sethe's final rescue. For she is finally saved from Beloved, who by this point has all but starved her to death, by a group of women who do not believe in laying down their weapons of defense. These women approach the house at 124 Bluestone convinced that they are facing a malevolent power. They bring "what they could and what they believed would work," amulets and charms for some, for others "Christian faith—as *shield and sword*" (257, emphasis mine). They are led by Ella, a "practical," unloved, woman who has a distrust of love and "a disgust for sex" and who does not believe in "clearing" old wounds, old wrongs: a woman who might be the antithesis of Baby Suggs (256). And they prevail: Beloved is banished, Denver and Sethe are rescued and reunited with the community.

Ella's emergence as an alternative guide in these final pages of the novel constitutes a powerful challenge both to Baby Suggs's authority and to those readings that represent her as the novel's sole vessel of wisdom. Yet Morrison clearly invites us to appreciate what Baby Suggs does for the community and to take her teachings seriously. She has Baby Suggs reappear, at this same moment of crisis, to speak the words that Denver needs to hear to fetch help for her mother. Standing on the front porch, terrified at the prospect of stepping out again into the dangerous world from which she and her mother have withdrawn, Denver experiences a visitation from her spirit: "Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything." Baby Suggs wants to know why Denver is paralyzed:

> But you said there was no defense.
> "There ain't."
> Then what do I do?
> "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

There are visitations and there are visitations, then. Denver accepts the guidance of her ghostly interlocutor, steps back into the community, and saves herself and her mother. But even as Morrison reaffirms Baby Suggs's authority and offers us a fuller sense of what she might have meant when she called on her followers to lay down sword and shield, she compels us

to question the efficacy of Baby Suggs's proto–New Age promises and prescriptions, her calls for "clearing" and unilateral disarmament. Ella's vision of the world is much grimmer and much closer to that of traditional Christianity than Baby Suggs's. Like Baby Suggs, she recognizes the terrible pressure of the past on this community. But she does not share Baby Suggs's conviction that the best way to relieve that pressure is through a wholesale "clearing." Her more old-fashioned prescription, drawn directly from the gospels (Matthew 6:34), is for a defending of the boundaries of the present against the terrors of the past and future alike: " 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' " (256–57). And she has a similar prescription for handling dealings with the other world: "nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge. As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world—well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (257). Ella's supernaturalist realpolitik, and her insistence that the past cannot be fully accommodated or redeemed, are powerfully collaborated by the novel, which seems in this sense to follow, at a certain remove, the trajectory of literary realism, conducting us from the great expectations of Baby Suggs's enthusiastic vision to the less enchanted supernaturalism of Ella's. Sethe's story demonstrates, as Iyunolu Osagie notes, that the command to lay down one's defenses can be taken too far; one needs "sword and shield . . . as a defense against love" itself, that is, against the very feeling that Baby Suggs wants her followers to foster. And one needs them "for the defense of one's life" (430) against invaders both human and nonhuman: slave catchers and spirits. There can be no simple formula for dealing with the world, then, no full surrender to enchantment or dropping of all defenses. The work of building peace, to which Baby Suggs contributes so splendidly, requires discernment.

Beyond this, the novel knows of no healing strategy, no blessing, that can redeem the "sixty millions or more" that died under slavery. It suggests in fact that they may have to be cast away again, left behind and "disremembered" by the survivors of slavery; "Remembering seemed unwise" (274). And it even implies that the disremembered can find no refuge in death, that their suffering continues beyond the grave. Such a view challenges, of course, not only the fashionable optimisms of the New Age but promises central to Christian soteriology as well.

Morrison's chastening of biblical expectations bespeaks a spiritual sobriety that is pervasive in postsecular fiction. This pessimistic assessment of sacred projects of perfection is evident, I would argue, not only in Pynchon's, Silko's, and DeLillo's fiction but also even in the more optimistic work of Tony Kushner. In each case, the text checks any impulse on the reader's part to repeat the excesses of enchantment: to discover in the reemergence of the miraculous a simple and satisfactory liberation from secular chains of regret and responsibility. And in each case, including Morrison's, this pessimism is only partially offset by the insistence that spiritually redemptive forces are nevertheless also at work in the world.

Beloved's view of living spiritual communities and individuals, then, emphasizes both the difficulties of a spiritually inflected life and its possibilities. Great teachers make mistakes and die but live on in ways that are not only metaphorical. Utopian promises are checked by harsher realities, but dreams of reconciliation take hold in more subtle ways, and the traditional community turns out to contain resources for survival that utopian radicals have overlooked. The larger community draws both on utopian expressions of love and on more routinized and skeptical expressions of that emotion. And believers, who are doomed to stumble in their efforts at discernment, can also learn. Morrison, then, rejects fundamentalism, but she also refuses to reduce the traditional church to a vessel of oppression or to insist that the alternative spiritualities of people like Baby Suggs and Consolata are without their own risks and excesses. Consolata and the Reverend Misner, Baby Suggs and Ella, the charisma of the clearing and the charity of the food committee and the youth fellowship meeting both do their saving (and imperfect) work. The call to disarmament and the call to arms are both appropriate calls and both are desperately hard to apply. But perhaps there is something like grace at work in the world, after all, for those who do not surrender to despair. *Beloved* and *Paradise* alike affirm the reality of the spiritual world, the utility of prayer, the place of revelation, the power of prophetic witness, the worth of religious community, the reality of "blessedness," and the wisdom of persevering on spiritual paths.

Epilogue: Limited Gifts

One of the most widely shared features of the contemporary fiction I am discussing is its exuberant violation of the ontological codes of literary real-

ism. In text after text, the walls of the visible world come down, doors open, angels break through, zones separated by what Ondaatje calls the sadness of geography or time are suddenly opened to one another. But the openings are, without exception, emphatically partial and the world revealed complex: characters are not conducted from the barren confinements of a secular universe into a temple of ultimate truths or a great hall of light. Rather, the openings that occur extend their vision in limited ways, disclose unmapped zones and require them to practice, if they can, the difficult arts of discernment. So, at the comic climax of Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace*, the novel's protagonist is rewarded with "[a] [l]ittle [v]ision" (215). And so, at the end of *The English Patient*, we learn that Kirpal can see Hana across the thousands of miles that separate his garden in India from her home in Canada. But, Ondaatje explains, "this is a limited gift, he has somehow been given, as if a camera's film reveals her, but only her, in silence." And here the gifts stop: "he cannot discern" the "company she moves among" (300). No more can the Reverend Misner see clearly through the door or window that opens in midair above a killing field in *Paradise*, although the visionary experience inspires him to speak with great conviction to a congregation before which he has been, until now, clumsy and baffled. No more can the needy crowd in *Underworld* hold on to their vision of the angel Esmeralda, which appears, and then is gone, on a billboard in the Bronx. "And what do you remember," DeLillo's narrator asks, "when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?" (824). There is no answer provided here, only a choice thrown at the reader ("you") and a demand for discernment: was it the spirit of wishfulness that washed over the crowd or was it, in fact, "something holy"? When the sacred is only partly or ambiguously revealed, as in these texts, it cannot provide spiritual certitude, but neither can it form the foundation for the kind of dogmatic conviction that sponsors religious prejudice and wars. Thus these texts, as experiments in what Vattimo, Stephen K. White, and Jane Bennett, call "weak ontology," conduct us into a vividly reenchanted, but dauntingly open, world. "What distinguishes a weak ontologist from a traditional metaphysician," Bennett explains, "is that the former emphasizes

the necessarily speculative and contestable character" of his construction of the real and the ideal (160–61). In *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*, Marianne DeKoven discovers a closely related, even overlapping, trajectory in postmodernist treatments of the "emancipatory Enlightenment-humanist project" (287) of utopia. It has been a goal of postmodernism, she argues, not so much to denounce the utopian impulse itself as to draw back from its most extravagant (and politically murderous) representations of social possibility, affirming only those manifestations of the impulse which are " 'limited': muted, partial, local, diffuse, multiple" in their aims (25). These are of course the very qualifiers—"limited," "partial," "multiple"—by which the novelists under study here attempt to render the religious impulse itself survivable. By emphasizing the partiality of vision, the contestability of texts, the inevitably limited nature of spiritual gifts, and the need for discernment, they attempt both to restore a sense of the divine and to avoid the road that leads back to that enchanted enclosure where the passions are brewed that make for religious wars and massacres. It is useful to be reminded that secularists must fight a similar battle on their own terrain in order to prevent secular dreams of the perfect from destroying the possibilities of the good.

What most threatens the American Indian is the theft of the sacred. . . . This is a subtle holocaust, and it is ongoing.
—N. Scott Momaday

4 Narratives of Turning in Native American Fiction
N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich

While the religious dimension of contemporary Euro-American fiction is often overlooked, this is hardly the case when it comes to Native American literature. Here, on the contrary, spiritual preoccupations are taken for granted and even expected, so that a Native American writer who may not at first seem to share them—for instance, the novelist James Welch—is in danger of marginalization in the literary market. It is possible to ascribe this expectation to the emphatic registration of religious elements in the work of eminent Native American novelists such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich. Certainly we find, in their fiction, some of the most powerful accounts of postsecular struggle

against secularism and fundamentalism. But the more general argument of this study—that religious concerns and projects are hiding in plain sight across a wide range of contemporary fiction—militates against such a simple explanation. It seems more likely, then, that the audibility of Native American spiritual discourse in contemporary literature stems at least in part from the already established role of Native Americans in the Euro-American imagination. For Native Americans have long figured there as the Other to the secularizing, mechanizing West. They are assumed to be at once more spiritual and more "organically" related to the Earth: closer to it and its gods, more attuned to its subtle promptings, less distracted by materialistic drives, mechanistic civilization, reason's abstracting and mortifying powers. And since this "planetary" form of spirituality has, at least since the romantic era, been identified with a critique both of modernization and of the institutional religions of the West, Native American spirituality has long been accorded respect by religious-minded Westerners critical of the dominant Western religions. If the spiritual preoccupations of Native American literature are dramatically visible, then, it is not only because Native American narratives are often, in fact, infused with religious ideas but also because Native Americans have been represented as the repositories of a subversive sacred knowledge by cultural prophets from James Fenimore Cooper to Carlos Castaneda. And it is because many spiritually homeless Americans, alienated both from secular values and from the dominant religious institutions, continue to turn to Native Americans for inspiration and instruction. Indeed, William Connolly's description of the postsecular position—"the earth is fragile; highly organized human economies are interwoven with its fragility; . . . reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated" ("Letter" 155)—will sound familiar to anyone versed in contemporary Native American literature, as will Misao Miyoshi's and Gayatri Spivak's recent calls for a "turn to the planet."

One would not want to embrace, in other words, either a simple positivistic explanation for the visibility of spirituality in Native American fiction ("Euro-American readers see it because it is there") or a simple projectionist view ("Euro-American readers see it because they habitually assign to others disavowed or lost features of their own culture"). The second option is particularly disabling. It can obscure the crucial role of the religious within Native American culture. And it implicitly prejudges any Euro-American interest in Native spiritualities, writing such interest off as

mere metropolitan exoticism or as colonial appropriation and so discounting the possibility that it might represent, at least in part, a respectful and politically enabling appreciation of non-European modes of seeing and being. That Native American spirituality has had a political resonance both within and beyond Native American culture is, I think, indisputable: it has contributed not only to resistance movements within Indian cultures but also to the cultural radicalism of the sixties and the "green" movements of subsequent decades. If the spiritual concerns of contemporary Native American writers are widely acknowledged, in other words, it may be because certain Native Americans and non–Native Americans alike are disposed, for not entirely different reasons, to take these concerns seriously.

Narratives of Return

N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, four of the most widely acclaimed novels of the Native American renaissance, are all structured around the narrative of postsecular turning that shows up everywhere in contemporary fiction and that seems to reflect a cultural turn as well, at least within some sectors of the contemporary world. At the same time, they suggest that this drama of turning or conversion is being lived out in very different ways in different sectors of society. In these novels, as in the non-Native novels studied here, characters disenchanted with secularization stumble back toward religiously inflected modes of being that are marked by key features of postsecular spirituality: polytheistic pluralism, attention to the Earth, an emphasis on spiritual practice, and a distrust at once of sweeping claims for salvation and dogmatic rigidities. But at the same time, these Native American novels demonstrate that colonial experiences of secularization and return are distinct in many ways from related metropolitan experiences and that the religious life of Native Americans is unique. So, for instance, in the "mainstream" social worlds imagined and addressed by Pynchon, DeLillo, and Morrison, the secularization of individuals' sensibilities is treated as something that needs no narrating or explanation. A cultural given, it has, in one way or another, already occurred, and the story to be told is one of a fresh turning to the religious. But for Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich, the secularization of the Indian subjects is

an ongoing, incomplete, and sharply painful process, inextricably linked to a history of conquest and coercive acculturation. "[W]hat most threatens the American Indian," Momaday has written, is the "is the theft of the sacred. . . . [t]his is a subtle holocaust, and it is ongoing" (*Man* 76). Native American postsecular fiction traces the unfolding of this holocaust and looks for ways to check and reverse its effects.

The impact of this experience of partial secularization, as represented in the novels, also differs in fundamental ways from that of metropolitan secularization. American culture, the novels show, simultaneously estranges Indian subjects from their own deeply religious cultures and refuses to grant them full citizenship in the modern, secular West. It strands them, in other words, in a condition of intimate estrangement from Native and secular cultures alike. Momaday tells the story, in *The Man Made of Words*, of a Sioux Indian named Plenty Horses, who in the wake of the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 killed a cavalry officer who was trying to make peace. The twist in the story is that Plenty Horses, far from embodying something like the pure resistance of a culturally uncompromised subject, was the product of five years at the infamous Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. " 'I shot the lieutenant,' " he testified later, " 'so I might make a place for myself [again] among my people' " (103). But the effort failed. Until the end of his life, Momaday writes, Plenty Horses "could not quite get back to it. His very being had become tentative; he lived in a kind of limbo, a state of confusion, depression, and desperation" (102). Native American novelists offer us sustained representations of this excruciating situation and its tragic consequences. Ontologically and culturally unhoused, Momaday's Abel, Silko's Tayo, and Erdrich's Lipsha Morrissey drift back and forth for years between two worlds, neither of which they fully know and neither of which they can fully enter. Many of the agnostic Westerners we encounter elsewhere in contemporary fiction enact shadowy inner versions of this painful oscillation between the secular and the sacred. But because Euro-American modernity accommodates both secular and conventionally religious ways of being, and because one's social belonging in mainstream culture is not necessarily determined by one's relation to the religious, this oscillation is not perhaps as profoundly destabilizing as it is for many Native Americans, for whom the divide between the secular and the religious is not only ideological but cultural, political, and geographical as well. Certainly it gets less attention in non-Native American postsecular fiction.

Not only the representation of secularization but that of postsecular turning and of the religious life itself is distinct in these novels. In the fiction of DeLillo, Pynchon, Morrison, and others, the unchurched protagonists turn to the religious but not to the traditional institutions of their communities. Their turning tends to be improvised, undirected, and eccentric or else prompted by extraordinary events. And it tends to lead them to culturally marginal or self-fashioned forms of spiritual practice. In these Native American novels, in contrast, turning is emphatically about returning: its possibility or impossibility. In Momaday's and Silko's novels, the route leads back into traditions still firmly housed in geographically and culturally distinct colonized communities. And in Erdrich's, which speaks back to Momaday's and Silko's, the possibility of such a return is debated without resolution. Even so, Erdrich's novels tend to end with the tentative, partly parodic, partly serious affirmation of some kind of reconnection to, or going on within, traditional ways. Thomas Benediktsson argues that such narratives of estrangement and return are "common in the postcolonial novel" worldwide (123) and describes their trajectory concisely: "A member of an oppressed and marginalized people is suffering from a grave illness, a malady that seems simultaneously to be psychological, physical, and spiritual. Eventually this character is healed through traditional ritual and through a literal encounter with the supernatural. . . . At the end of the novel . . . there is hope for a new society based on the values of the reborn traditional culture" (123). Such novels, and Benediktsson mentions works by Achebe, Narayan, Ousmeme, and Keri Hulme, as well as *Ceremony*—suggest, he says, the power of "reawakened gods to cure the postcolonial malaise" (123).

Yet the Native American novels discussed here, like the other postsecular novels under study, also address the dangers of returning. They reject the sort of return that would lead to mental and cultural enclosure within too rigidly formulated traditions, attempting instead to render tradition itself more spacious and accepting of difference. And they press back against the sentimentalized vision of the religious life, the fantasy of an easy return, and of an idyllic, trouble-free existence under the sacred canopy of the spirits. Popular culture invites us to read Native American narratives of religious recovery as depicting a return to "primordial unity and transcendence" (Selinger 45). But this is not the story Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich tell. The cosmos that sustains and heals their protagonists is intricately made, precariously balanced, full of risk, and subject to shifts and

mortal disruptions. The cultures that honor that cosmos are also shown to be intricately made, and their integrity is said to depend in part on their capacity to accommodate otherness and innovation. Thus although living in reverent relation to the cosmos and the community is, in *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, the key to living well, it is also shown to require sustained and strenuous practices of attention, care, and struggle. And recovering this relation, once it is lost, is depicted as very difficult indeed. It entails rigorous spiritual practices and means accepting "entangling interdependence and painful responsibility" (Moore 382) at a moment of historically unprecedented challenges. Once again, then, in these novels, religious life is represented as involving responsibilities and challenges and hence as inappropriate to anyone seeking simply to escape from the cares and obligations of the world. And the responsibilities occasioned by spirituality are represented as consistent with significant secular values and goals: the emancipation of subject peoples, an ethics of reciprocal responsibility, a certain openness to cultural others, and care for the Earth.

In both *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, most critics agree, the Native American protagonists make something like a full return to traditional ways of life and relations to the cosmos. But Momaday and Silko, who are themselves complexly situated postsecular students of the ancient ways, also use Native American tradition and history, within the novels, to perform an immanent critique of rigid traditionalism, with its fierce exclusions and inflexibilities. Native American communities, they suggest, have strong traditions of understanding culture and cosmos alike not only in terms of stable cycles that assure sustenance and harmony but also in terms of change, innovation, and invigorating intermixture. And their works are designed to foreground and continue this strand of thought. Abel and Tayo, their protagonists in the narratives of return, embody mixture: like Momaday and Silko themselves, they are "mixed bloods" who have lived in the Anglo world. And in telling their stories, as Catherine Rainwater, Susan Scarberry-Garcia, and others have shown, *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* draw dramatically on a range of different tribal traditions.

The emphasis on dynamic relationality and multicultural hybridity in these works has led critics like Susan Perez Castillo, David Moore, and Bernard Selinger to suggest that they are not about return at all but rather about the crafting of a recognizably postmodern, antiessentialist cosmos characterized by "ontological instability" (Castillo 292), radical mutability,

and hybridity. The cosmos of *Ceremony*, Moore suggests, is "a complex of changeable differences united merely by the mutual context in which they form" (378). But surely this is to go too far: the texts figure cosmos and culture alike under the sign of a dynamic, relational essentialism and espouse practices of limited incorporative hybridization, the inclusion of new populations and ways within a strong, continuing cultural order. They insist (against certain strands of traditionalism within the Native American community) that relationality, mutability, and hybridity are features of the Native American cosmos and cultural practice, but they do not make change and mixture into the defining features of existence. Instead, they represent these elements of existence as features of a larger, divinely decreed and sustained system of balance, reciprocal relatedness, repetition—a system described in Native American sacred texts and nourished by Native American practices and values.

As we shall see, Louise Erdrich is less ready than Momaday or Silko to imagine that Native Americans can find their way back out of the modern milieu into profound relation with the nonhuman natural world and the spirits. But even Erdrich is preoccupied with the project of return. Drawing on postmodern values and postmodernist narrative strategies, her works project a comedic vision of partial and impure returning that closely resembles, in many ways, the visions we have encountered in works by Kushner, Pynchon, and DeLillo. Taken together, then, the return narratives of Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich can help us trace out a debate between two forms of literary postsecularism, one that issues powerful, impressively unsentimental proposals for a revisionary return to sacred tradition and another that attempts to imagine modes of religious recovery more compatible, to one degree or another, with dominant contemporary ways of life.

Religious traditions are bottomless. To become conversant with even one requires a life's study, a life's practice. Clearly, then, the postsecular scholar, who shares with the protagonists of the novels he studies a history of imperfect initiation into even those traditions he might claim as his own, will stumble repeatedly in his efforts to make sense of less familiar religious references and affirmations. An early episode in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* sharply elucidates this sort of risk. In the scene a visiting white woman, Angela St. John, reflects on the ultimate purpose of a sacred corn dance at Cochiti Pueblo. She is struck by the gravity of the dancers' demeanor and concludes propitiously that they were "intent upon something

that she could not see[,] . . . some reality that she did not know, or even suspect" (32–33). So far, so good. But when she asks, "What was it that they saw?" and tries to answer her own question, the result, as Lawrence Evers notes in an important essay on the novel, is a dramatically unpersuasive account of the spiritual project of the dance. The dancers, Angela concludes, saw "nothing after all, nothing at all. But then that was the trick, wasn't it? To see nothing at all, nothing in the absolute. To see beyond the landscape[,] . . . beyond the clouds and the pale wash of the sky—the none and nothing beyond that" (63). Achieving transcendence by this means, Angela surmises, is the very goal of religious practice: "That was to be free and finished, complete, spiritual" (33). Angela's interpretation is colored, one supposes, by her familiarity with a central mystical tradition in Christianity. She has been reading "from the lives of the saints" (29), and she ascribes to the Native Americans the practice of that *via negativa* famously charted by her Spanish namesake, St. John of the Cross. But nowhere in *House Made of Dawn* do we find any corroboration for her reading of what the dancers are up to. Far from seeking to annul or transcend the world and its processes, Pueblo practice, as depicted here, seems designed to render them, through celebration, more richly visible, more powerful, and more nurturing. This brief episode functions, then, to prepare European American readers, as Pueblo practices and perspectives are encountered in the text, to appreciate just how dramatically they differ from Christian practices and purposes. But it functions as well, to caution us, if we are non-Native readers and critics, about the dangers of any effort to interpret an unfamiliar tradition. Even an "angel" and a "saint," Momaday suggests, or perhaps especially an angel or a saint, may fall victim to her own cultural biases in attempting to "read" the spiritual practices of others. Forewarned, one proceeds, one hopes, with caution.

Colonial Secularization and the Difficulty of Return

For the reasons sketched out above, the process of secularization is more thoroughly explored in the Native American works discussed here than in most postsecular fiction. It is represented, accurately, as part of a deliberate campaign carried out through the institutions of the state. Silko's Tayo, for instance, attends a school where the science teacher systematically dis-

parages religious theories of the real: "In school the science teacher had explained what superstition was, and then held the science textbook up for the class to see the true source of explanations" (94). Borrowing a ritual gesture from Christian liturgy, where the Bible is sometimes elevated in a physical manifestation of its absolute ascendancy, the science teacher enthrones rational, secular explanations as the sole source of truth. And, *Ceremony* insists, this campaign is very effective. It fully persuades Tayo's cousin, Rocky, and causes Tayo to doubt traditional beliefs he still refuses to surrender. But the process of secularization takes other, less systematic forms as well in this fiction. Tayo, Abel, and Lipsha Morrissey are drawn out of traditional ways and off the reservation by the spell of the secular West's products and power. And Abel and Tayo are secularized by the prejudices against "half breeds" that make them semioutcasts within the Native American community. Finally, they are literally torn away from traditional ways of life, dismantled and nearly destroyed, by alcohol and modern war.

For none of these characters, however, do the shocks and seductions of the secular lead to an all-but-complete extinction of religious allegiances, intuitions, and impulses. Abel, Tayo, and Lipsha never enter, that is to say, that space of taken-for-granted-secularism in which we find so many postsecular protagonists at the beginning of their stories. The still vigorous pull of their own cultures, the powerful presence of their own communities, and the racism of white society make assimilation impossible, both subjectively and socially. Instead, the three protagonists get caught between incompatible worlds in patterns of painful oscillation and intimate estrangement. The rhythm of their lives becomes one of restless physical and mental coming and going between the reservation and the white world. They are estranged from both worlds: able to inhabit them physically but cut off from the very different goods, material and spiritual, displayed before their eyes. The painfulness of their condition is driven home by brief descriptions of the play of assessments that sponsors it. For each world appears, in turn, now as alluring and enchanted, now as barren. Thus Ben Benally, Abel's Navajo friend, reflecting on returning to the reservation, avers that "if you went home there would be nothing there, just the empty land and a lot of old people, going noplace and dying off" (140). "There's nothing there," he insists, "just the land, and the land is empty and dead" (158). This is the way the land looks to the secularized self. But when Benally is in another mood, he remembers the landscape of home as fecund, sacred, and "beautiful all

around" (130). The interplay between the conventionally inscribed and the italicized sections of his narrative registers this profound self-division. His anxiously optimistic representations of life in Los Angeles are interrupted by italicized passages that recollect the sweetness of life on the reservation. These counterassessments, their difference and intensity inscribed in the very materiality of the novel's print, break in on Benally's efforts to chant up the modern world with the force of irrepressible memory: "If you come from the reservation," Benally explains, "you don't talk about it much. . . . You think about it sometimes; you can't help it, . . . [but] it mixes you up" (135).

Tayo, the protagonist of Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, is similarly torn. He has been taught, by white teachers and texts, to dismiss sacred beliefs as mere superstition, and although he still feels that the old stories and ways are true, "he had no reasons to believe" (94) them any more. And he is faced as well with the sheer physical power of white civilization, a power that seems to point incontestably to the superiority of white knowledge of the workings of the world. The undermining effect of his exposure to the white world threatens repeatedly to thwart his efforts to return. So, in the very midst of the healing ceremony conducted by Betonie, he has a crisis of confidence: "He wanted to believe old Betonie. He wanted to keep the feeling of his words alive inside him so that he could believe that he might get well. But when the old man left, he was suddenly aware of the old hogan. . . . [A]ll of it seemed suddenly so pitiful and small compared to the world he knew the white people had—a world of comfort in the sprawling houses he'd seen in California" (126–27). "What kind of healing power was in this?" (127) he asks himself, looking around in broken-hearted dismay at Betonie's shabby possessions.

Long after the formal ceremony's conclusion, after he has followed Betonie's directions, been assisted by the mountain spirit Ts'eh, and found the cattle, and after his powerful experience of well-being on the Acoma road, Tayo is still subject to sudden crises of belief: "It was difficult . . . to call up the feeling the stories had, the feeling of Ts'eh and old Betonie. It was easier to feel and to believe the rumors. Crazy. Crazy Indian. Seeing things. Imagining things" (242). The force fields of secularism and the sacred are too strong for either one to drive the other entirely from the space of the mind, except briefly or after great struggle. So the effort to return is shadowed, as is the effort to leave, and while it is possible to move deeper

into one world or the other, abiding remains, through most of the journey, a momentary gift rather than a steady possession.

It is not only this profound ambivalence that shadows these characters but their ignorance as well. They are cultural outsiders in both worlds, and their physical distance from Native American lands only underlines a more profound condition of exclusion. Thus when they seek to break back into the Native American world, and to recover the religious experiences at its core, they are desperately hindered by their history of partial secularization, intimate estrangement, and oscillation. This history has left them unchurched, untutored, and only semiliterate in the ways of their tradition. Like the protagonists of most postsecular narratives, then, they are beginners, spiritual novices condemned, in their efforts at turning, to awkwardness, improvisation, and eclecticism.

The novels offer a complex assessment of this crisis of knowledge and access. At one point in *House Made of Dawn*, for instance, a Navajo living in Los Angeles sings the prayer from the Navajo Night Chant ceremony that gives the novel its name. Perhaps Benally knows other songs and prayers (there are over five hundred in this single ceremony itself [Reichard 286]), but what is certain is that he, and the prayer itself, are far from home, in a hostile world, and that any sufficient program of protection and healing would require, according to Navajo beliefs, a much more sustained recourse to the religious: the ceremonies, the sacred community, and the sacred geography of the Navajo nation. Later we find Abel giving voice to the same song as, hungover and all alone, he participates in the sacred ritual of the Jemez Pueblo winter race. Is the Navajo prayer effective in these alien settings? The novel suggests that it may be and by so doing rebukes the ethnic exclusivity of some traditional communities. But it also suggests, through its representation of these faltering and fragmentary performances, that Native Americans like Benally and Abel have been bitterly displaced and dispossessed. So, too, Erdrich suggests, has Lipsha, who in a ludicrously comic act of improvisation, substitutes a frozen, store-bought turkey for a wild goose in his effort to make "love medicine." And so, too, Tayo, who in the face of a drought, has to improvise a rain ceremony: "He knew the holy men had their ways during the dry spells. . . . Josiah never told him much about praying, except that it should be something he felt inside himself. So, that last summer, before the war, he got up before dawn and rode the bay mare south to the spring in the narrow canyon. . . . The

things he did seemed right, as he imagined with his heart the rituals the cloud priests performed during a drought" (93–94). The implications of these episodes are complex. On the one hand, they expose the crisis of cultural reproduction that is threatening to destroy the Native American world and the fully warranted anxiety of those who find themselves without the traditional spiritual resources of their people. But on the other, they suggest that the weakening of tradition, especially when tradition has swung toward exclusion and excessive ritualism, may enable the heart to do its work again and the tradition to be reinvigorated. The things Tayo does, working from his heart, may be as effective as those he would have done had he been fully initiated in his peoples' sacred practices. It rains.

Thus while these narratives of awkward improvisation testify to the regrettable unraveling of sacred traditions in Native America, they also implicitly encourage the victims of this unraveling in their efforts to reconstruct the religious life. As we have seen, this is a common theme of postsecular narrative. Nor are the protagonists of such narratives ever left entirely without guidance. On the contrary, they get help from spiritual experts who enable them to reconnect with the religious. The trajectory of Tayo's life, in this regard, is sketched out in one of the sacred stories embedded in *Ceremony*. It is a story about a small child who is kidnapped by bears while his family is picking piñon nuts in the mountains. When the family discovers the boy's footprints "mixed in with bear tracks," they send for a medicine man who knows "how / to call the child back again" (129). The recalling must be done with great care:

> They couldn't just grab the child
> They couldn't simply take him back
> because he would be in between forever
> and probably he would die. (130)

The subject of colonial cultural kidnapping, this story suggests, can no more be reinitiated in his culture by mere physical reentry than a boy who has been raised by bears. The process requires complex acts of "calling" and recalling, acts that can only be initiated by spiritual adepts and the ceremonies they have devised. Without the help of such experts, the bear child would be stranded forever in that very condition of intolerable in-betweenness, or negative hybridity, that seems to have claimed Tayo. Yet postsecular narratives add a new element to this story of recalling. They

introduce spiritual guides who are themselves spiritually unorthodox and who help their subjects turn toward the religious without surrendering to dogmatism and exclusion. So Tayo's return is made possible both by Ku'oosh, a traditional Pueblo wise man, and by Betonie, a spiritual maverick similar in many ways to Kushner's Belize, Pynchon's Inoshiro Sensei, and Morrison's Lone DuPres. What then are the arts of return? And what, in religious terms, is the imagined destination?

Turn to the Planet

Because Native American traditions share important features with other sacred traditions, Pierre Hadot's influential work on ancient religious and philosophical paganism can help us understand something of what is at stake, and what is being proposed, in Native American accounts of return. The goal of many ancient spiritual traditions, Hadot explains, was to "heal" individuals by helping them to transform themselves and, quoting Merleau-Ponty, to " 'relearn to see the world' " (253). In these traditions, "the mind acquires peace and serenity by becoming aware of its relationship with the world, to the extent that it re-places our existence within the cosmic perspective" (259). The sage, who exemplifies the benefits of this effort, he notes, quoting Bernard Groethuysen, " 'never ceases to have the whole constantly present to his mind. He never forgets the world, but thinks and acts with a view to the cosmos. . . . He does not let himself be distracted from the world, or detached from the cosmic totality' " (251). By virtue of this relation the sage has access to "the therapeutic powers of the world" (86). At moments he experiences, as the Epicureans put it, " 'divine delight' " (88) or "cosmic ecstasy" (259) in contemplating the beauty of the world and its vastness, but serenity and wisdom are his more constant rewards. These are not readily won. To begin to see the world and oneself from the perspective of the sage entails a "profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being" (83). "Such a transformation," Hadot continues, "is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of [the] inner self" (83) and the acquisition of a cosmic perspective.

Talal Asad usefully explores the nature of certain forms of spiritual exercise in *Genealogies of Religion*. Pressing back against the conventional

anthropological understanding of ceremony and ritual as modes of symbolic action aimed primarily at projecting a vision of the world, Asad describes them instead as types of "body learning" (77) that help participants learn to see and be differently. It is only theology, Asad argues, that has led us to think of religious instruction almost exclusively in terms of the acquisition of propositional knowledge. For in fact, a study of actual religious practices suggests that certain " 'body techniques,' " all but ignored in the modern West, "form a precondition for varieties of religious experience" (76–77). These techniques—rituals, ceremonies, and other spiritual exercises—are forms of "practical, that is, technically effective, behavior" (58) designed to transform the self and its relation to the world. "The inability to enter into communion with God," Asad writes, is "a function of untaught bodies. 'Consciousness' becomes a dependent concept" (77). We have already seen this way of understanding the religious dramatized in *Vineland*.

Asad is working here with medieval monastic traditions—hence his emphasis on the goal of communion with God. And even as he seeks to render the body respectable as a site of religious becoming, he remains trapped within a familiar dualism—hence his reference to the body as an "instrument" or "technical means" (75). In contrast, the practices of Hadot's classical pagans, and those practices recommended in the Native American novels under study, are designed to ensure that those who use them are never " 'distracted from the world' ": religious experience remains embodied all the way down, precisely because the world is sacred. Still, the pedagogical strategy Asad describes, with its strong emphasis on body learning, helps us recognize the even more fully embodied strategy identified with return to sacred modes of being in the Native American narratives under discussion. In Native American cultures, these novels suggest, not just a privileged minority of philosophical adepts but the entire community is schooled from birth in body practices that enable them to attend to the world, to view events from a particular cosmic perspective, to draw on cosmic energies, and to promote cosmic well-being. Abel and Tayo have benefited from a half-effaced version of this schooling. But under the pressure Euro-American culture they have become " 'distracted from the world[,] . . . detached from the cosmic totality.' " In these postsecular narratives, then, the protagonists go back to school, signing up for a set of strenuous spiritual exercises that gradually reconnect them with the traditional world. They

"retreat," distancing themselves, physically, from the zones of modernity. They redirect their attention to the particular features of the natural surround. They practice ancient arts of orientation by sacred landmarks and the solar calendar. And they perform specific ritual acts and sacred tasks. The effect of these practices, at their most powerful, is simultaneously physiological, psychological, ontological, and soteriological.

Traditional Pueblo and Navajo ceremonies and rituals play central roles in the projects of healing and return described in *House* and *Ceremony*. Abel begins his cure by taking his place in the winter ritual of the runners, a tradition at Jemez Pueblo, where Momaday himself was raised. Tayo is set on the road to healing by the Navajo medicine man Betonie, who conducts a version of a traditional Navajo healing ceremony, the Ghost Way (Swan, "Symbolic Geography" 229). Abel and Tayo are cured, as well, by taking up and mastering roles that have been, as it were, divinely mapped out (in legend) and divinely assigned. Abel learns to perform the heroic protective role vouchsafed him in his vision of the eagle who captures a snake, and Tayo assumes his role as an avatar of Sun Man, the hero who helps the world at times of drought. (As several critics have shown, he is also a male avatar of Yellow Woman, another figure of fecundity.) Both novels, in other words, point directly to the role of traditional religious resources—spiritual maps and exercises—in the project of return. People are healed, in these texts, by knowing, nurturing, and practicing specific, communally held and preserved ceremonies and stories that make sense of reality. And they are healed, as well, as Peter Kerry Powers points out, by returning to and reclaiming a particular place, reestablishing "a particular orientation to a particular land" (87).

But Abel and Tayo make their ways back into a spiritually saturated and sustaining reality by other, less culturally specific practices as well, and it is on these that I want to focus, for several reasons. A great deal of valuable work has been done to elucidate the function of culturally specific ceremonies and stories in the transformations that occur in these novels. But these ceremonies and stories are, in Native American cultures, frequently understood to be exclusive possessions of specific clans and communities, and the novels often represent them as such. At the same time, however, they seek to introduce a wider audience to the arts of return. "We Americans," Momaday writes, explicitly including non-Indians as well as Indians in his "we," "must come again to a moral comprehension of the earth and

air. We must live according to the principle of a land ethic" (*Man* 49). If the novels at hand speak directly to the exigencies of Indian return to Indian traditions, then, they undertake this broader project of recovery as well.

The reinitiation of the characters in these texts is poignantly complex and messy. Only partially initiated in sacred ways to begin with (in this sense their status as half-breeds is less an autobiographical matter on the part of the novelists than a symbol of a larger cultural situation), they are given a sort of remedial crash course in Native American beliefs by wise elders, then set to follow the ways that conform to and confirm these beliefs. Gradually, with many setbacks, they reactivate the inner voices that focus the self and the world in Native American terms, reestablish the tactile and visceral relation to the natural surround that comes from moving within it in accordance with their own bodily powers, and reacquire habits of attention powerfully honed in the work of tracking game and wresting sustenance from the Earth. This schooling consists of episodes of religious instruction followed by restorative talking, walking, and tracking, all designed to produce visceral, embodied transformation.

Thus in *House Made of Dawn*, Abel undertakes his first attempt to return, and understands its failure, in terms of specific oral language practices: "His return to the town had been a failure, for all his looking forward. He had tried . . . to speak to his grandfather, but he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it" (53). What is potentially redemptive here is not just the ability to take up the old language, with its different construction of things, though this of course is important. Abel, Momaday suggests, needs as well to body forth his native tongue: to speak, pray, sing in it. In the sections of the novel that feature John Tosamah, a preacher who synthesizes Christian and Indian ideas, Momaday alludes repeatedly to the Christian text that comes closest to sharing this conception of the embodied word, the Gospel of St. John. There, as here, the embodied Word of Jesus and his teachings works to produce an effect of ontological refashioning by way of a paradoxical process theologians call "reciprocal indwelling." That is to say, that when a Johannine believer takes in the sacred word, makes it part of himself in the most profound manner, he then enters the Word, finds himself living in the world postulated by the sacred language. And at the same time, he contributes to expanding the reach of that world, its fuller coming into being. Momaday's

Indian theory of the word is ultimately more this-worldly and melodic than John's. The tropes of "rhythm" and attunement he employs are perhaps not quite tropes. The novel gestures through them, I'd argue, toward a vision of the world in which humans literally resonate (or fail to resonate) in subtle ways with each other and with the surrounding world. And they suggest, as William Connolly does in *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, that ontological change is best produced by practices or pedagogies that address the visceral as well as the cognitive level of being. Indian religions recognize this by involving both the diseased individual and the full community in strenuous regimens of song, chant, and prayer: the Night Chant Ceremony, from which the prayer recited by Benally is taken, lasts nine days and involves the recitation of over five hundred songs and prayers. Abel cannot hope, by himself, to achieve the level of discipline and the communal resonance of such ceremonies; it is only when he joins the racers at the end of the novel that he begins to find the support he needs. Then, although he still has "no sound . . . no voice" "under his breath he [begins] to sing" (185).

It is no mere coincidence that Abel comes to song while running. Again and again, in *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, the characters walk, dance, or run their ways back into intimate relation with the sacred community and land. When Abel walks out of town into a canyon, he comes "almost to be at peace" and wants "to make a song" (53). Horseback riding has a similarly therapeutic and transformative effect on Benally. Out riding, he remembers, you "could see the earth going away under you, and you could feel and hear the hoofs. . . . I[I]t made you want to pray" (149). Walking or running also makes it possible to break through the grid of acquired categories and see the world with greater immediacy. As Abel runs at the end of *House*, "[p]ure exhaustion [lays] hold of his mind, and he [can] see at last without having to think" (185). Momaday drives home the importance of this shift by listing the elements of the natural world that become vividly visible to Abel: "He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn" (185). This break into vision is as important to Abel's recovery as the break into song that follows it.

Ceremony makes a similar claim for the pedagogical value of walking. The agents of Tayo's estrangement, Silko insists, are not only the teachers who expose him to the ideologies of modernity. The entire modern technological ensemble lures him and other Native Americans away from

intimate temporal/spatial relation to the Earth. This ensemble of forces is modestly exemplified in *Ceremony* by the several pickup trucks in which Tayo rides. These apparently innocuous machines distance him in nearly fatal ways from the world he needs to recover. It is during his long walks and horseback rides—the walk north on the Acoma road, for instance—that he recaptures for moments his sense of visceral relatedness to an ordered, beautiful, and benignant cosmos. Conversely, getting into a pickup truck or car inevitably sets him back: it is to reenter a world of speed, blurred vision, and roaring sound that "detunes" and disorients him. So, after the ceremony at Betonie's, a truck ride costs him his hard won "sense of balance" and he decides to "walk until he recognized himself again" (154). And so when he is picked up by his buddies just after his vision on the Acoma road, "the truck's motion and the beer were soothing; the steel and glass closed out everything. The sky, the land were distant then; trees and hills moved past the windshield glass like movie film. . . . [T]he past, even a few hours before, suddenly lost its impact and seemed like a vague dream compared to these sensations: the motion, vibrations of wheels against the road . . . and the steel cab snug around them" (241). In the truck, Tayo becomes, in Hadot's terms, distracted and detached from the cosmic totality, from history and the living surround. Silko suggests, then, that one cannot drive back into the sacred world: it is only accessible on foot. Nor can one recover one's voice and sense of reverence without walking. In one scene, Tayo rises early, walks his horse to pasture, and then, as he watches her eat, remembers and rehearses a ceremony, singing out its "prayer" of celebration to the "power" of the sun at sunrise (182). For an Earth-centered spirituality, Momaday and Silko insist, modest practices of embodiment such as walking or running are crucial. And other postsecular writers seem to concur. One recalls, for instance, that Slothrop walks back into a relation to the sacred in *Gravity's Rainbow* and that DeLillo's James Axton and Jack Gladney also walk to the sacred sites (the Acropolis and the overpass) where they are partly healed.

The equally "grounded" practices of tracking, hunting, herding, and farming also acquire the status of spiritual exercises in the novels at hand. There are four substantial episodes of hunting in *House Made of Dawn*, and *Ceremony* offers a detailed description of Tayo's efforts to track his uncle's lost cattle. Hunting also plays an important role in Erdrich's work: the first novel in the series that eventually features Lipsha Morrissey is entitled *Tracks*. One well-recognized function of these hunting episodes is to

reveal the sacred nature of the relationship between human and nonhuman beings in Indian ontology. Hunted animals are treated with respect, the Earth itself is revered as a spirit-filled source of plenty, and divinities are closely identified with specific places and creatures. But the episodes also drive home the less well-recognized pedagogical possibilities of hunting, tracking, and farming. Pursued in the correct spirit—and these texts insist repeatedly that white hunting and Indian hunting are radically different activities—these practices not only dramatize sacred understandings of interspecies relationships but also deepen such understandings by viscerally schooling Indians in particular forms of attentiveness. In a fashion that recalls other sacred itineraries of attention, a pragmatic practice fosters an aesthetic appreciation, which, in turn, sponsors a spiritual apprehension. With his attention directed by necessity to the living world, the Indian hunter comes to appreciate its fecundity, dynamic order, and beauty. Local understanding yields a conception of the cosmos. And appreciation deepens into reverence.

House Made of Dawn traces this transformative itinerary with great economy in the episode where Abel hunts geese with his older brother Vidal. Abel can "see nothing at first," but then, instructed in stillness and attention by Vidal, his gaze captures a flight of the geese with remarkable precision, and he notes even the "bright beads of water [trailing] in their wake" as they rise (105). Seeing intently now, he apprehends an order in things: "they made a dark angle of the sky, acute, perfect." And the vision moves him to cry out in wonder and joy, "*Did you see? Oh, they were beautiful! Oh Vidal, oh my brother, did you see?*" (105). The pragmatic gives way to the aesthetic in this moment and the aesthetic apprehension of harmonious order to the ethical-ontological recognition of connection ("oh my brother") that is central to many Indian spiritualities. But it is not a matter of climbing some ladder of increasing abstraction out of the sensuous world. Each moment in the process is preserved and honored in its integrity.

In *Ceremony* Silko suggests that hunting can work not only to reconfigure one's sense of space and time but also to effect that indispensable metamorphosis of the self alluded to by Hadot in his description of the making of a sage. In the extended episode that traces Tayo's tracking of the lost cattle, she offers us a vivid, richly detailed depiction of the external topography and the drama of recovery that unfolds on it as well as a parallel narrative of change in the shadowy inner terrain of the subject. The act of

"[h]unting the cattle" (192) not only entails bodily effort; it also produces subtle but profound effects on the embodied mind. The concentration required to track the cattle works, as certain forms of meditation are said to do, to bring about a therapeutic ontological shift. Tayo is "so intent on finding the cattle" that he forgets "all the events of the past days and past years." This forgetting induces a physical change: memory and anticipation are "strung tight in [Tayo's] belly," but "suddenly the tension snapped. . . . He stopped. . . . The silence was inside, in his belly; there was no longer any hurry" (192). In this rendering of a moment of ontological crossing, the subtle physical practice of tracking effects a transformation of Tayo's time sense itself, first a forgetting (we are still within conventional Western temporality at this moment) and then a glimpse of a profoundly different temporality: "He knew then why the oldtimers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment. . . . This night is a single night; and there has never been any other" (192). The "oldtimers" live not just in anachronism but in another living temporality, and Tayo joins them there through the practice of tracking. The consequent shift is not only cognitive; it is muscular as well: it restores the distracted and agitated bodymind to equanimity and to a different world. Silko represents this transition repeatedly, drawing on different figures to trace the mysterious inner terrain of muscular memory and embodied belief. "Inside him," she explains, later in the story of the tracking, "the muddy water turmoil was settling to the bottom, and streaks of clarity were slowly emerging" (196). And later, "Inside, his belly was smooth and soft, following the contours of the hills and holding the silence of the snow" (205). Tayo's spiritual exercise of tracking, part of a ceremony of healing that entails a significant political and material act of reappropriation, engages the body in order to refashion the body, as well as the mind, reestablishing harmony between them both and the "eternal" world of hills and snow.

In *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, then, the recovery of a sense of sacred relatedness to the world is an emphatically embodied process. And the practices this process necessitates are not only the dramatically choreographed ones of Indian ceremonial, which remain the property of Indian peoples. They are also the universally available practices of en-chanting, walking, tracking. Like any practices, these can be perverted and rendered merely mechanical acts. But it is the suggestion of these novels that when they are undertaken with the idea in mind that the world is a sacred place,

a coherent cosmos informed by principles of harmony, balance, and reciprocal relatedness, they can profoundly deepen the penetration of these principles and produce the indispensable metamorphoses that return postmodern wanderers to the world at their feet. This goal of visceral return to the planet is the common property of postecular fiction, but it is most powerfully dramatized in these Native American novels of turning.

Postmodern Return: *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*

It is perhaps clear by now that while *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* are postsecular in one sense—they register secular ideology's sharp impact on traditional Native American cultures and subjectivities—they have less patience with modern, secular ways of seeing and being than most postsecular novels. So, while they make powerful dramatic arguments for the inclusion of mixed blood individuals in tribal communities, they are less enthusiastic in the celebration of mixture and hybridity than many contemporary texts. Indeed, they treat hybridity itself ambivalently, as a fact of history and a potential resource for Native American renewal but also as a threat to the very existence of Native American cultures and worlds. Silko makes a case for intertribal sharing and the inclusion of mixed bloods like Tayo and Betonie within the circle of Native American life; she even suggests that modernity binds all humanity into "one clan again" (246) by its threat of universal destruction. But in *Ceremony* (and even more in *Almanac of the Dead*) the path to restoration requires a thoroughgoing rejection of European American civilization. *House Made of Dawn* is perhaps even less interested in imagining a postsecular stance that would blend Western secular and Native American sacred habits of being on the terrain of technological and cultural postmodernity. The novel's transplanted Native Americans are manifestly lost in Los Angeles, even though the city makes room (in a cellar) for a syncretic Native American Church and its wildly conflicted pastor. There can be, as Peter Kerry Powers has pointed out, little or no room for compromise between a civilization that treats the entire natural world as "raw material" and "property" and a civilization that sees specific landscapes as divinely ordered, populated by sacred beings, and designed to support a fundamentally stable and diverse community of human and nonhuman beings (87).

It makes sense, then, given the sharpness of the divide between contemporary Western and traditional Native American ways of seeing and being, that many Native Americans should equate recovery and survival with sharp rejection of Western ways and redemptive retreat into spaces deep in the traditional native world. But what is to be done if such spaces are not available and if the fight for separate survival already seems to have been lost for so many Native American cultures and subjectivities? Louise Erdrich uses the patterns and tropes of the return narrative to explore the possibilities for some sort of religious regrounding in this context of apparently ineradicable intermixture. In her novels about contemporary life in Ojibwa communities on the northern plains of the United States, the semisecularized characters who most resemble Abel and Tayo keep coming and going between nominally Native American and emphatically Euro-American zones right to the end; they live now on reservations seamed with Euro-American settlers, commodities, institutions, and values, now in cities and towns that accommodate some Native American institutions. There are no great hunters or farmers among the contemporary young and middle-aged characters in Erdrich's novels. And there are no great walkers or horseback riders nor any paths leading out to landscapes only faintly touched by Western modernity. Indeed, one of the most thriving cults on the reservation is the cult of cars. Because of this insistence on the ubiquity of mixture and modernity, and on apparently endless comings and goings, Erdrich's plots lack the stark power of Silko's and Momaday's, which conduct the reader, along with the protagonists, from modern landscapes of terrible spiritual darkness into the spiritual glow of still powerfully premodern landscapes and communities. But in offering an exuberantly comic view of religiously inflected Native American resistance to European ways, Erdrich provides an alternative vision of Native American preterite spirituality and its chances for resistance, recovery, and survival. The spiritually inflected modes of being with which her Lipsha Morrissey experiments are scandalously improvised, dramatically commercialized, and mostly ineffectual. The story of his struggles mocks the dream of a widespread and effective retreat from modernity. But at the same time, Erdrich insists that Lipsha is empowered and improved by these experiments. Erdrich stands, in this regard, closer to Kushner and Pynchon—our great postsecular comedians—than she does to Momaday, Silko, Morrison, or even DeLillo.

This is not to imply that Erdrich takes lightly the terrible history of Native American dislocation or the struggles of Native Americans to survive. In *The Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Tracks*, she traces the history of her Ojibwa community in the early twentieth century, when white invasion and missionary propaganda shattered the people's relationship to their land and gods. *Love Medicine* (1984 version) and *The Bingo Palace*, on which I focus here, trace the aftermath of this history. The community has suffered catastrophic losses: of place, power, culture. "To American Indians," Erdrich observes in an essay, "it is as if the unthinkable has already happened, and relatively recently. Many Native American cultures were annihilated more thoroughly than even a nuclear disaster might destroy ours, and others live in the fallout of that destruction, effects as persistent as radiation—poverty, fetal alcohol syndrome, chronic despair" ("Where" 48). A further consequence of the historical catastrophe, Erdrich suggests in *Tracks*, has been a loss of faith in the benignant powers of the sacred world and perhaps a weakening of these powers themselves. Caught in a famine produced by white encroachment on Native American lands and resources, the community discovers that its traditional spiritual leaders cannot help it. "There was something lost," the narrator explains, "Fleur had not saved us with her dream, and it now seemed that what was happening was so ordinary that it fell beyond her abilities. She had failed too many times, both to rescue us and save her youngest child. . . . Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper [a Manitou or powerful spiritual being] slept deep in the lake" (176–77). "Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable" (177), the narrator concludes. The Native Americans' gods and sacred powers cannot carry the day against white encroachment: "[i]t was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in trees, the bush, or spirits of animals that were hunted so scarce they became discouraged and did not mate" (139).

These losses have all but shattered the human community depicted in Erdrich's fiction: sections of the reservation itself have been sold to white farmers, and intermarriage has produced a community of mixed blood Native Americans with French, Swedish, and Irish as well as Ojibwa ancestors. Meanwhile, the "fallout"—drink, domestic violence, and other dramatic forms of self-destruction—cripples the survivors of the great catastrophes. They seem poised, a character in *Tracks* suggests, to share the fate of the few buffalo who survived the great slaughters on the plains. The "beasts

that survived," she explains, "grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. . . . They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. They tried suicide. They tried to do away with their young. They knew they were going, saw their end" (140). *Love Medicine* introduces us to a Native American community that seems at times to be dedicated to this very project of self-annihilation. In the first section, one character commits suicide, and another deals with his mother's attempt to drown him as a child. A family reunion turns into a scene of drunken, self-destructive violence. Surveying the damage, which includes the demolition of several pies baked for the occasion, two characters pass judgment on the project of return. Let's "go back to the Cities," suggests one, "You always get so crazy when you're home." And another, attempting to mend the smashed pies, concludes ruefully that "once they smash there is no way to put them right" (39).

And yet Erdrich tries again and again to imagine some way of putting things right, staying or coming home, and going on. Two paths in particular command her attention: the path of selective accommodation to Euro-American ways and that of refusal, resistance, and preservation of the dream of return. Some of the most vigorous and materially successful Native Americans in her fiction are pragmatists who make their peace with cultural hybridity, preserving certain traditional spiritual ways, including the disciplines of dance and the strenuous spiritual exercises identified with the sweat lodge and vision quest, but also pursuing business schemes that enable them to survive in the money world of contemporary America. Erdrich's representation of these entrepreneurial figures and the projects they undertake is profoundly ambivalent. Commuting between a "business self . . . and the spiritual side of life" (*Bingo* 164), they both preserve the tribe as a community of humans and threaten to destroy its spiritual foundations. Thus in *Love Medicine*, Nector Kashpaw fights in Washington for the tribe (*Love* 18) but betrays Fleur Pillager and Nanapush, heroic holdouts, and arranges the eviction of Fleur's daughter Lulu Lamartine, another traditional. In *The Bingo Palace*, Lyman Lamartine's business ventures help the people survive economically, but his compulsive gambling and his plans to build a bingo palace cause him to jeopardize the sacred pipe of his ancestors and desecrate the sacred lake that is the home of the divine being, Misshepeshu.

It is tempting to identify Lyman's fixation on gambling as a sign of his complete capitulation to what Erdrich calls the "money life" (*Bingo* 221).

But as Kathryn Shanley reminds us, luck and gambling are elements of the sacred cosmos in many Native American religious traditions; hence Lyman's business sense and his bingo project cannot in any simple sense be taken as signatures of assimilation. It makes a certain amount of sense, then, that Fleur Pillager should appear to Lyman, in a vision or dream, as a face on a video slot machine, urging him to "*Take the quick new money. Use it to purchase the fast old ground*" (*Bingo* 149). Shawnee Ray is an equally complex figure. Her commitment to traditional dance locates her among those who would preserve Native American ways. Lipsha Morrissey sees her as "the best of our past, our present, our hope of a future" (*Bingo* 13). But the dancing name she uses—"Miss Little Shell"—as she works the powwow circuit in order to win prize money for college and a business suggests a certain spiritual hollowness.

Although the novels' evaluation of this set of entrepreneurial traditionalists is scrupulously balanced, Erdrich's deeper sympathies lie, I'd suggest, with a second group of characters, the holdouts and resisters—Nanapush and Fleur Pillager in *Tracks*, Gerry Nanapush and Lipsha Morrissey in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*—who cannot bring themselves to make the transition to economic and ideological modernity. Fleur, her grandson Gerry, and her great-grandson Lipsha are all Pillagers, fictional members of an actual Ojibwa family that "conducted the last Indian uprising in 1898 against the government" (Vescey 18) resisting, among other things, the Allotment Act of 1887, by which communally held Indian lands were turned over to individuals and hence made available for sale. Fleur refuses to sell off her land, and when the logging company gains rights to cut the trees, she resorts to sabotage. Gerry Nanapush embraces the Native American rights movement of the sixties and is jailed for killing a state trooper in a shootout. Lipsha is dramatically less heroic, more inclined to become "[a]ll business," as he puts it, and betray his birthright (*Bingo* 62). He is identified with Esau, the biblical archetype of this sort of betrayal, throughout *The Bingo Palace*. And he is perpetually making a fool of himself. Yet for all his trying, Lipsha cannot quite convert himself into an entrepreneur; he winds up productively entangled in the world of vision, helping Gerry escape the authorities.

While Erdrich celebrates these characters, it often seems that she can imagine no plausible way to accommodate their desires to remain in or return to the traditional, religiously infused, ways. Fleur's forest falls and

her land is slated for development as a casino. Gerry is jailed and then driven into exile. And Lipsha seems doomed to a life of marginality or to an early death. Momaday and Silko can still imagine a route of return and revitalization that entails turning one's back on modernity's culture of machines and speed: in *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, as we have seen, Native Americans walk, run, and hunt their ways back from the complex estrangement of automobile culture to the spiritually vital world of Native American tradition. But these routes seem closed to Erdrich's contemporary Native Americans.

If Erdrich makes fiction out of the dream of physical return and religious recovery, then, it often seems as if she does so only in order to exorcize that dream from the cultural imagination of Native America. June Morrissey's attempt to walk home, in the opening episode of *Love Medicine*, ends with her in death in a snowy field, and at a reunion in her honor, it is a drunken white girl who exhorts the family to return to tradition. " 'Tell 'em Uncle Eli. . . . They've got to learn their own heritage!" (30). A later episode, "The Red Convertible," reads like a oblique retort to Momaday's and Silko's stories of successful healing and return. Here again we are introduced to a veteran, Henry Morrissey, who is haunted by his experiences of war. Here again it is suggested that the vet be taken to a native healer. But this suggestion is made and rejected in a single clause ("my mom was afraid of trusting Old Man Pillager" [148]). Instead, Henry's brother tries to help him by getting him to fix up—not walk away from—his prized red convertible. The effort is futile, and Henry kills himself. "There's no return to what was and no way back," Lipsha declares in *The Bingo Palace*: "There's just emptiness all around" (258–59). The breathtaking allusion, here, to the Navajo prayer that runs through *House Made of Dawn*, indicates just how close Erdrich comes to writing off the dreams of the earlier texts with which she is in discussion.

Yet Erdrich's investment in the project of spiritual revitalization is as strong as her skepticism regarding the possibility of what might be called "pure" return, the full recovery of a traditional way of being. The result is that *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* teem with characters exploring possibilities of resistance and return and that not all their efforts prove futile. Lipsha himself exemplifies this: he does not succeed in making his way back into the traditional Ojibwa life and cosmos. But he achieves, by clumsy and often comic means, the kind of partial and impure return

to sacred ways of being depicted in the Euro-American work of Pynchon, Kushner, and others. Both the continuity of concern that links Erdrich's work to Momaday's and Silko's and her shift toward centrally postmodern ways of imagining return are visible in her fashioning of Lipsha's story.

Although Lipsha belongs to a different Native American community and to a different generation from Abel and Tayo's, he resembles them in many important ways. He is a "mixed blood" who cannot establish his credentials as a full member of the community. He does not, for most of his narrative, know his father, and he has been abandoned by his mother. He has been away, and when he returns he finds himself "back where I belong without a place to fit" (*Bingo* 11). He is subject to bouts of "confusion" and "bleak sadness" (*Love* 245–46) so dire, at times, that he is plunged into nihilistic reveries and contemplates suicide. He is even described, in a clear allusion to Tayo's cure by way of Betonie's hoop ceremony, as "caught in a foreign skin" (*Bingo* 9). Yet he is committed to his community: "I . . . remained on the rez," he explains, "to look after the elder ones: I believe that my home is the only place I belong and was never interested to leave it, but circumstances forced my hand" (*Love* 270). And he is also, like Abel and Tayo, chosen by the gods and their human intermediaries to serve the community in significant ways. The lake Manitou, Misshepeshu, saves him from drowning; he is gifted with a healing touch that may "come down from Old Man Pillager" (*Love* 248); and he is selected by Fleur Pillager as "a successor, someone to carry on her knowledge" (*Bingo* 7), although he seems an unlikely choice.

Like Abel and Tayo, then, Lipsha seems destined to do the work of revitalization. But he belongs to a younger generation even less well versed than theirs in traditional beliefs and practices, a generation shaped by consumer values and the expectation of an easy life. The full consequences of this formation become evident in the climactic episode of *Love Medicine*, when Lipsha attempts to heal the rift between Marie Lazarre and her husband, Nector Kashpaw, by practicing a little traditional love medicine. The scene is a hilarious parody of the tropes of recovered cultural memory, person-to-person transmission of knowledge, and improvised but effective practice deployed by Momaday and Silko. Lipsha speaks, as he does throughout the novel, in a spiritual vernacular shot through with the argot of commercial mass culture. Love medicine is "an old Chippewa specialty" (199); faith in it is "belief even when the goods don't deliver" (203). Lipsha wants to use

methods that come down from the ancestors, but very little has in fact come down. Putting his mind to the task of recollection, he "remember[s] things I'd heard gossiped over" (199). Gossip is his only source, it turns out, not because all other conduits are closed but because he deliberately shies away from those "specialists" who might have instructed him. "I knew the best thing was to go ask a specialist like Old Man Pillager," he concedes. "But the truth is I was afraid of him. . . . Old Man Pillager was serious business, and I have always thought it best to steer clear of that whenever I could" (199).

Lipsha's improvisations are as ludicrously inadequate as his rationalizations. Quickly rejecting as too difficult the few spiritual practices he has heard about, he makes up a ritual of his own. He will kill two geese—"Them geese, they mate for life" (200)—and feed their hearts to his grandmother and grandfather: "Wouldn't that work? Maybe it's all invisible, and then maybe again it's magic" (200). But killing wild geese proves too much of a challenge: Lipsha lacks even rudimentary hunting skills. Improvising again, he buys frozen turkeys at the Red Owl store, takes "the hearts away from the paper packages of gizzards" (203–4) and feeds them to the quarreling couple. Nector promptly chokes on his and dies. If Momaday and Silko emphasize the necessity of improvisation and sanction the effort, Erdrich, in this scene at least, emphasizes its brainless frivolity and denies its efficacy.

Unlike Abel and Tayo, then, Lipsha is a dramatically unheroic figure. He lacks their desperate dignity. He is not self-possessed and silent, he's a talker, and he's not serious, he's a self-deprecating wisecracker, a Native American slacker in the lineage of Pynchon's Slothrop and Zoyd Wheeler. His affinities with these characters are evident again in *The Bingo Palace*. Here we find him caught up in his own struggle with love and turning in his desperation to traditional religion and its specialists. But both his motives for seeking spiritual instruction and his experiences of tutelage are comically undignified. Perhaps, he thinks, "getting the real old-time traditional religion" (157) will help him attract "Shawnee Ray's attention" (158). "I'm in the market for a more high-type vision," he tells Lyman Lamartine (159). But his search for this vision, by way of an extended fast, is a fiasco. Beset by ridiculous fears, he manifests a pathetic lack of courage and self-respect and wins, for his effort, a visit from a "crabby" (200) wisecracking skunk straight out of a movie cartoon. Erdrich turns the moment when the skunk sprays Lipsha into a parody of an epiphany. "I am surrounded and

inhabited," Lipsha testifies, "by a thing so powerful I don't even recognize it as a smell. There is no before, no after, no breathing or getting around the drastic moment" (200–201). Here, as in *Love Medicine*, then, Erdrich seems intent on mocking the postsecular narrative of return and awakening.

Yet in both cases Erdrich refuses to simply write off her protagonist's postsecular fumblings. The cartoonish skunk, it turns out, is based on a similar skunk who figures in Ojibwa sacred narrative (Gross 446), and Ojibwa religion, as described by Lawrence Gross in a splendid essay, is comic in its conception of the cosmos and antiheroic in its conception of even its superhuman inhabitants. Thus the comic and antiheroic cast of Lipsha's adventures is as traditionally Ojibwa as it is recognizably postsecular. And it is consistent with both Ojibwa tradition and postsecular codes of spiritual comedy that Lipsha's bungled fast sponsors a series of visions that are deeply moving and decisively transformative. He is told, by the skunk itself, that the land scheduled for development as a bingo palace "*ain't real estate*" (200). He learns the terrible truth about his mother's treatment of him as a child. And he learns as well that as a child he was been saved from death by a Manitou, a sacred being. These lessons change his life.

In another manifestation of postmodern sensibility, Erdrich makes Lipsha not only a clueless consumer of traditional Ojibwa religiosity but also a fatuous consumer of sentimental culture's favorite conversion narrative, the story of the opening of the heart. This ubiquitous narrative, a spin-off of deep spiritual discourses, collapses profound soteriologies into simple stories of the miraculous healing, opening, or education of the heart, understood now not just as a physical organ or as a figure for the benignant emotions but as a site of mysterious powers. It is tempting to write off such narratives, but Erdrich solicits a more complex response. The powers of the heart play an important role in the episode from *Love Medicine* in which Lipsha's efforts to concoct and administer a traditional "love medicine" that will return Nector Kashpaw to his wife lead instead to Nector's death. Full of remorse for what he has done, Lipsha is able nevertheless to console his victim's widow. When Nector's ghost visits Marie, Lipsha explains that "Love medicine ain't what brings him back to you, Grandma. . . . It's true feeling, not no magic. No supermarket heart could have brung him back" (214). There's a familiar double negation here, both of the "magic" of traditional religiosity and of the values of the supermarket—that is, of contemporary secular culture. Where these fail, the "true feeling" of the

open heart succeeds, or so Lipsha claims. And subsequent events tend to confirm his analysis, for Marie responds to Lipsha's confession and credo with a touch of such "tenderness" (214) that it constitutes a "secret lesson" (215) and restores Lipsha's own mysterious power to heal, a power that seems here to have little to do with traditional ceremonies and a great deal to do with the mysteries of the heart. Once again, at the end of *Bingo Palace*, Lipsha's heart opens. Caught in a blizzard on the plains, in a car that has run out of fuel, he stays with the child he has kidnapped by mistake, clasping it to his heart. "I pull the baby closer to me, zipping him inside of my jacket, here is one child who was never left behind. . . . This baby never was alone" (259). In both *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace*, then, Lipsha's narrative ends with a redemptive bit of heart work, an outpouring of care that testifies to the mysterious powers of the heart. And in both cases Erdrich leaves us to decide how to read the scene: as a parody of the sentimental narratives that are Lipsha's favorite sacred texts or a confirmation of their impure, unaristocratic power. Like DeLillo's Jack Gladney or Pynchon's Zoyd Wheeler, then, Lipsha follows a low comedic, sentimental road to experiences that can be seen to indicate limited but real spiritual awakening and maturation. And here as in a novel such as *Gravity's Rainbow* or an oral tradition such as the Wenabozho cycle (Gross 440), lots of serious work gets accomplished under the sign of spiritual slapstick. Lipsha, in the course of the three novels, undertakes a vision fast, is enjoined by the spirits to resist the "money way" of the whites, discovers and saves his father, the heroic Gerry Nanapush, sacrifices himself for a stranger's child, and is saved from death first by Misshepeshu the Manitou and then, perhaps, by Fleur Pillager, the gifted clan matriarch, who has the power to take his place in death. The itinerary he follows leads, in other words, back into a world of sacred forces and experiences. and it does so by a road and in a manner that, while based on Native American tradition, breaks with the dream of heroic and full return to model a weaker, more partial form of returning, one that leaves those who take it struggling with painful confusions under socially desperate conditions.

Erdrich's refusal to stoke the dream of full restoration is evident not only in shape of her stories but in the ontological texture of her prose. In an illuminating study, Catherine Rainwater suggests that Erdrich's work is designed, in fact, both to project a sacred universe and to make its mapping extremely difficult. Thus instead of offering the reader a single "interpretive

framework" (164) or code for understanding the extraordinary events they relate, Erdrich's texts introduce "code conflict" (164) by repeatedly citing "conflicting religious paradigms" (166): "In *Love Medicine*, for example, the chapter titles ('The World's Greatest Fisherman, Saint Marie,' 'Flesh and Blood,' 'Crown of Thorns,' and 'Crossing the Water') cue the reader to expect the story to unfold within the intertextual framework of references to the Bible. . . . However[,] . . . encoded biblical material is juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition" (165).

Both traditions, Rainwater continues, "allow for the supernatural dimension of existence" (166). However, these "religions are epistemologically, experientially, and teleologically different": the structure of the supernatural or sacred and the way "in which the individual relates to this dimension" differ radically (165–66). Here again Erdrich's work resembles Pynchon's. The conflict of ontological codes makes it difficult to situate oneself fully within any single sacred conception of the real. This is not to imply that Erdrich gives equal time or weight to Christian and Ojibwa ontologies. Her work clearly privileges Ojibwa religious structures, powers, practices, and values. But the conflict of codes does seem designed to frustrate any dream of discovering, in her Native American fiction, a sacred cultural enclosure proof against the heteroglossia of the larger culture—or even a single sacred structure at the foundation of the world. In comparing her return narratives to those of Momaday and Silko, then, we see a division that marks not just contemporary Native American imaginations of the religiously inflected life but postsecular discourse in general. For postsecularism entertains both the dream (Connolly, Falk) of a restored relation to nature and the dream (James, Vattimo, Habermas, Rorty) of new modes of religious being strong enough empower the weak and weak enough to prevent a slide into fanaticism.

There is God only in the desert. . . . Outside of this there was just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots shaped the world.
— *The English Patient*

5 Neomonastic Paths and the Limits of Postsecularism
Michael Ondaatje

By many standards, Michael Ondaatje is a worldly writer. He was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1943 to a well-established family with a complex ethnic heritage: "the Ondaatje ancestry," writes Ed Jewinski, "is a blend of Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil" (23). In 1952, after his parents separated, he went to England to be with his mother. In 1962 he moved again, following his older brother to Canada, taking his BA at the University of Toronto, and becoming a Canadian citizen. His fiction reflects this legacy of mixture and displacement and the acute sense of historical forces this legacy so often fosters. Focused on colonial and postcolonial migrancy, it tracks people in motion across geographical and cultural borders. It takes for subjects the class struggle in Canada, the politics of race and empire in World War II, and postcolonial civil wars and human rights work in

Sri Lanka. These subjects are most often addressed, in the academy and beyond, in terms of the secular assumptions and discourses of psychology, economics, and political theory. But Ondaatje's approach to them is dramatically inflected by an equally strong interest in the religious. Raised an Anglican in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka, Ondaatje draws on both birthright traditions in his fiction. *The English Patient*, set in Italy and North Africa during World War II, invokes the landscape of medieval Catholicism and its arts, and *Anil's Ghost*, set in war-torn Sri Lanka, draws in similar ways on the Buddhist culture of its Sinhalese population. These novels not only explore religiously resonant cultural zones; they are themselves, in their conception of the world, their definitions of the desirable, and their aesthetic composition deeply imbued with the religious. They draw on religious ontologies to make sense of human beings, the world, and the events—both social and personal—that shape them. They celebrate practices—devotion, dispossession, retreat, and sacrificial service—closely identified with premodern religious ways of being. And the life paths they most emphatically endorse are versions of medieval religious paths, the practices of monks and nuns, saintly warriors and heroic martyrs.

Both novels are also characteristically postsecular in the stories they tell and the issues they raise. Both feature secularized characters (Hana and Almásy in *The English Patient*, Anil and Gamini in *Anil's Ghost*) who turn back toward the religious. Both depict the creation of fragile spiritual communities at the very edge of society. And both sketch new modes of religiously inflected seeing and being based on monastic models. But the novels also question two prevalent features of postsecular thought: an aversion to organized faith and an exclusive commitment to partial faiths and experimental communities. Is it possible, Ondaatje asks in these novels, that postsecular aversion to organized religion is disabling, that there are strands of conventional belief as ethically and theologically attractive as any imaginable postsecular alternative? And is it possible that the more general postsecular aversion to formal organization, whether doctrinal or institutional, means that emerging postsecular communities will be too weak to survive? If so, what fate awaits those who commit themselves to such experiments? Ondaatje's approach to these questions is both careful and generous. He is more approving of traditional institutional modes of religious being and seeing than Kushner, Pynchon, and DeLillo and more pessimistic about the possibilities for postsecular community building. But

at the same time, he clearly identifies with and admires his most fiercely independent postsecular innovators. He represents their suspicion of traditional religion as justified and treats their wrenching efforts to imagine and embody new modes of religious being with great respect.

Neomedieval Narratives

As the introduction to this study suggests, a number of contemporary historians and social theorists, representing a wide range of political positions, draw analogies between the present moment and the period when classical civilization broke down and the "Dark Ages" began. Common to all of these neomedieval narratives is the claim that modernity's master narratives of inexorable progress toward a more prosperous, just, and orderly world are manifestly false. In one version of the neomedieval retort, the world has never in fact been anything but chaotic and unjust; in another it is becoming ever more so, as it did at the end of the classical era. Both versions submit that medieval modes of thought and practice can help us understand and handle things.

In the discourse of geopolitics, the function of the medieval analogy has generally been to "write off" certain zones of the world as irredeemably chaotic and to endorse a new ruthlessness in the defense of national interests: see, for instance, Robert D. Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy* or Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. But there are also versions of the neomedieval argument in which the analogy functions as a means of discrediting the power of the imperium and recommending unconventional, subtly postsecular, forms of resistance and opposition. This is, as we have seen, the case with Alasdair MacIntyre and Rudolph Bahro. Indeed, their versions of the neomedieval narrative are so apposite to Ondaatje's work that I cite them again here. "It is always dangerous," MacIntyre writes,

> to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another, and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. None the less certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from

> the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. . . . We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (244–45)

Bahro counsels a similar sort of retreat, not only from the institutions of the imperium but also from those of the traditional left as well. "Almost one and a half thousand years ago," he writes,

> the Benedictines gave the new Western culture emerging from the collapse of Antiquity not only a very significant economic impulse . . . [but also] a meditative basis—hence "pray [first] and work"—upon which the whole social radiation of their practice was dependent. The intellectual impulse from the monasteries . . . was essentially a spiritual one. It came into being by people getting involved in communicating so intensively with God . . . that they found their own true selves beneath the rubble and the character armor of their socialization—the energy source of their charismatic effect.

"We need," Bahro continues, "a new Benedictine order." But this new "movement will be different from the old" in significant ways: "The spiritual culture will not be linked to a repressive monotheistic idea of God. . . . Social organization will not be linked to the separation of the sexes and sexual oppression" (90–91).

In these two narratives, a discernibly postmodern and postsecular vision of history no longer dominated by narratives of enlightenment, progress, and liberation is combined with a premodern understanding of the geopolitical situation and of what is to be done. Resistance no longer takes the form of a continued struggle for reform or revolution along conventional lines. Instead it entails a surrender of dreams of imminent large-scale social transformation, a rejection of conventional political devotions to nation or cause, and a quasi-monastic commitment to deep reflection,

disciplined self-transformation, and the nurturing of alternative communities. In both narratives, this neomonastic turn is represented as a dramatically exploratory project rather than as a simple, deliberate, reappropriation of an ancient way of seeing and being. MacIntyre's pioneers often don't know what they are doing, and Bahro's are committed to a dramatic revision of traditional religious culture.

The *English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* read like accounts of the sort of postsecular, neomonastic turning described and endorsed by MacIntyre and Bahro. Both novels compare present times to medieval times. Both recommend a radical reordering of personal and political devotions. And both depict experiments in a neomonastic spirituality of retreat, radical simplification, and care. In these novels postsecular return is literally a matter of recovering ancient monastic modes of seeing and being: Ondaatje's characters traverse worlds torn and bloodied by war; they break with or imagine breaking with the imperium they serve; they remake themselves in monkish ways and seek out desert retreats and monasteries.

Canvassing explanations for what he calls "the prominence of religious identities" in the contemporary world, Clifford Geertz cites the " 'everything else hasn't worked' argument: successive disillusion with the ideological master narratives—liberalism, socialism, nationalism—as frameworks for collective identity, especially in the newer states, has left only religion" (177). Ondaatje develops a version of this pervasive and problematic argument in his fiction, where collective and individual experiences alike testify to the bankruptcy of reigning secular ideologies. In *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* historical events are shown to make a mockery of the West's master narratives of enlightenment, emancipation, and progress, while individual experience exposes the vanity of the romantic illusions that shape personal expectations of fulfillment in secular cultures. Westerners are conditioned by official histories to regard World War II as a bloody but crucial moment in the history of the human race, a triumph of progressive forces committed to freedom and democracy. But *The English Patient* refuses to take sides between the Allies and the Axis or at least refuses to take either side seriously as a guardian of humane and progressive values. Rather, it repeatedly represents the conflict in medieval terms as a worldly "feud" between unscrupulous imperial powers. Ondaatje's good citizens, who embrace the democratic and progressive ideologies of modern nation-states, find themselves "*fooled*" (*English* 296) into an organized act of im-

mense slaughter. Even those who enlist in the ostensibly neutral and humanely progressive work of science are violently disillusioned. Almásy and his desert Europeans, who are in love with exploration and mapmaking, discover that they have been scouting the routes of war. And Kirpal, who is enchanted with the intricate order of Western technology and who uses his technical knowledge to defuse bombs, learns that two bombs he has not defused have killed hundreds of thousands of fellow Asians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There is nothing authentically democratic or humane, in Ondaatje's view, about these political and scientific forces. Almásy, an historian and explorer, sees the organized anarchy of violently competitive interests everywhere. Scanning the globe, he finds "just trade and power, money and war. Financial and military despots," he concludes, shape "the world" (250). Another act of panoramic assessment, this one in *Anil's Ghost*, elicits and even more fundamental repudiation of the discourses of progress. The view from the top of a giant statue of the Buddha reveals a world of great beauty and vitality. But this same world is intrinsically, implacably, and violently unstable: "combustible . . . even without the human element" (306). Nothing that we are shown either in *The English Patient* or *Anil's Ghost* seriously challenges this assessment of things.

Experience also undermines, in Ondaatje's fiction, the perennially popular romantic belief that if social constraints are dismantled, passional energies will initiate their own harmonies or at least ensure our vitality. Ondaatje's lovers—Almásy, Katharine, Anil—tend to wind up beating and stabbing each other. Schooled to look for harmony and freshness of feeling in passionate love, they find only chaos and exhaustion. "I saw an awful thing among us," says Buddy Bolden, the protagonist of *Coming Through Slaughter*, who has left his own wife and moved in with the wife of a friend—that "passion could twist around and choose someone else just like that. . . . We had no order among ourselves. . . . We were all exhausted" (99). Anil concurs: "We are full of anarchy," she declares; "What is that quality in us . . . [t]hat makes us cause our own rain and smoke?" (138). Human beings, like the world they inhabit, are both luminous and combustible.

In the end, then, Ondaatje suggests, the master texts of secular modernity turn to dust. A character in *Anil's Ghost* experiences this failure as a doctor in the bloody field hospitals of Sri Lanka's civil war. He remembers

"the books . . . he kept . . . in his hands for hours as he sat in the cane chair trying to rest, trying to come down to some kind of human order, but instead only darkness came down on him in the room, his eyes peering at the pages while his brain stared past them to the truth of their times" (128). Faced with the carnage of a murderous war, Ondaatje's man of science no longer finds meaning in the secular texts that describe a world amenable to human ordering. Gradually, he stops "believing in man's rule on earth. He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land, or pride of ownership, or even personal rights" (119).

While at times Ondaatje suggests, like MacIntyre, that the modern world is slipping back into a dark ages, at other times he goes as far as to see modernity as nothing more than a continuation of medieval patterns of perpetual war and instability. In *The English Patient*, for instance, World War II is characterized as a "Mediaeval war" (69). And although it is described in *The English Patient* as the "last" such war, the term "medieval" surfaces again in *Anil's Ghost* to describe war-torn Sri Lanka in the eighties and early nineties. "We've become medieval" (186), declares Anil, and once again the texture of the represented world, with the three-sided savagery of its civil war, its images of dark roads, blood-spattered field hospitals, mud-covered laborers toiling in the gem pits, tends to confirm this assessment. This repeated invocation of the medieval works to recall readers from the hopes and dreams that enable us to think of modernity in terms of the secular transcendence of medieval disorder. And it also serves to recall and recuperate medieval ways of understanding history.

Almásy's style of writing history is offered, in this regard, as a preferable alternative to modern modes. Almásy tends to read contemporary events typologically, as recreations with a difference of major sacred events. So World War II is for him "the time of the war in heaven" (5) and certain contemporary soldiers are "warrior saints." In a similar mode, he revises the narratives of the Greek historian Herodotus not by writing his own history, or adding new chapters to a tale that breaks off two millennia ago, but by stuffing his copy of *The Histories* with interpolated "maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books" (96). Almásy chooses this strategy of internal amplification because "for him, the histories in Herodotus clarified all societies" (150).

Kirpal, the young Sikh soldier who shares the stage with Almásy and Hana, sees history in much the same way and shapes his life accordingly. In the anarchy of World War II, he concludes, there is "no order" except

that of the "great maps of [religious] art" that show "judgment, piety and sacrifice" (70). Taking refuge in this premodern repository of order from the chaos of the war and the secular ideologies that sponsor it, Kirpal temporarily fashions his own life around the sacred themes of medieval and Renaissance Italian art. He turns the Italian campaign into a pilgrimage to sacred shrines (77), enlists in rituals of Marian devotion (79), and joins the company bivouacking in a half-ruined nunnery. And Ondaatje endorses this strategy for survival. Through his portrayal of Kirpal, and through incessant allusions to medieval Christianity, he invites us to reconceive the contemporary world religiously, to see it as suffused with spiritual beings and energies banished by modern, secular ontologies. " 'Millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth,' " Katharine Clifton declares, reading Milton, " 'Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep . . . Singing their great Creator' " (144). We will hear little of the Creator in Ondaatje's work but much about these unseen spiritual creatures who transfigure the world by acts of praise and healing.

The religious turn endorsed by the novels is not, then, toward the modern, rationalized and secularized forms of religiosity characteristic, say, of liberal Protestantism. Nor is it to the contemporary fundamentalisms that so often justify war in the name of God and country. Ondaatje carefully contrasts the pacific and contemplative forms of religiosity he espouses with these fanaticisms. So Madox, a devout Christian, kills himself in an English parish church, in 1939, to protest a jingoistic sermon. "The priest" Ondaatje writes, "intoned blithely about battle, blessing the government and the men about to enter the war. Madox listened as the sermon grew more impassioned. He pulled out the desert pistol, bent over and shot himself in the heart" (242). Religion addresses religion here, and a believer does violence to himself (and, according to the church, to his soul) in the name of peace. There are other references to religiously sponsored collective violence scattered throughout the novel. A character remembers the "Bonfire of the Vanities," Savonarola's notorious assault on classical learning, which saw "everything . . . swept away—free will, the desire to be elegant, fame, the right to worship Plato as well as Christ" (57). And Hana alludes obliquely to the unholy alliance of evangelical Christianity and imperialism when she celebrates her father's very different spirituality: "He had never attempted to convert anyone in his life, just bandaging or celebrating events that occurred near him" (91).

Ondaatje's characters turn, then, neither to modern rationalized forms

of the religious that tend to take the disenchantment of the world and the triumph of individualism for granted nor to modern fundamentalisms that only perpetuate war making in the name of God but to medieval modes that figure the world in sacred terms and endorse a retreat from what Hana calls "the feuds of the world" (218) into communities of devotion and mutual care. They are rescued from the war-torn landscapes of the contemporary world into nunneries and monasteries, the half-ruined sites of this older, religious dispensation. On these sites, and with the help of unorthodox spiritual guides, they reinvent monastic modes of being, recover a sacramental sense of the world as infused with benignant energies, and rediscover devotional practices that enable them to commune with saints, fellow believers, and needy fellow beings. And these resources empower them to go on working in the world, for healing and peace.

Postsecular Cosmopolitanism: The *Communio Sanctorum*

The appeal of *The English Patient*, I would venture, is linked to its quietly insistent invocation of a particular image of cosmopolitan community. The novel rejects the promise of imperial citizenship that draws its protagonists together on the field of war and offers a counterimage of participation in a cosmopolitan spiritual community of all saints. And it celebrates the postsecular, neomonastic communities it depicts as partial embodiments of this intangible entity. The notion of the saintly community, or *communio sanctorum*, has a long and complex history of deployment in Christian discourse. It refers in its most conventional form both to actual Christian communities and to "the mystical union of the faithful on earth, the suffering in purgatory, and the saints in heaven into one spiritual body with Christ as its head" (Heffernan 130). Members of this community, believers hold, are sustained by divine grace, which strengthens them in mysterious ways, allowing them to resist and reform the world. Envisioned in this way, the religious life and salvation become a "communal" process (Heffernan 130); human happiness a matter of membership in loving communities. So Luther, as one student of the idea notes, taught that it was important for the believer "not to be alone, but to live and to believe and to pray with other Christians, whether living or dead" (Lienhard 290). In so doing, believers create "a new social unit," an alternative and implicitly oppositional

community based on a "radically different idea of kinship nourished not by blood or tradition . . . but by faith" (Heffernan 125). This spatially dispersed, cosmopolitan community includes not only exemplary figures but the imperfect as well (those "suffering in purgatory"): the saints, Luther stipulated, were "not necessarily those who had accomplished extraordinary things, but those who in daily life lived (and live) in the faith and grace of Christ." (Lienhard 290). The community is sometimes understood to be hierarchically ordered, with an elite of saints mediating divine power to less spiritually exalted fellows. But, as feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson shows, it can also take a radically egalitarian form, in which "mutual companionship" (*Friends* 79) between "sisters and brothers" (*Friends* 81) defines the relation between members. This is the form in which the idea appeals today to many feminist and liberation theologians and the form in which Ondaatje develops it.

There are no extravagant supernatural events in *The English Patient*, but signs of the saintly community shine out, as it were, throughout the novel. The community is rendered vividly, for instance, in the works of religious art to which Kirpal is so powerfully drawn: the images of Solomon (70), Isaiah, Mary (79), and the angel Gabriel (280). These and other "naive Catholic images" are "with him" in the lonely darkness of his wartime work (278). And it is referenced, as well, in Hana's frequent allusions to her saintly patient and her saintly lover. An allusion to "the Cathedral of All Saints" (157) in Cairo invokes the idea of an inclusive community, and the Golden Temple at Amritsar, as described by Kirpal, is a splendidly embodied non-Christian manifestation of its glories. A "haven in the flux of life, accessible to all," the temple resounds with "the hymns of the saints—Ramananda, Nanak and Kabir" (271).

All these invocations of the community are explicitly religious: they project a world radically different in its temporal and spatial construction from that prescribed by the various secular naturalisms. But Ondaatje's version of the community is characteristically postsecular. He leaves open the question of its actual ontological status. Are the saints who assist Kirpal "imaginary friends" who produce real psychological and social benefits or are they actual living mediators of a mysterious more-than-human beneficence? And he extends membership in the saintly community to collectivities and individuals that are not formally "churched." (Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic, advocates a similar extension. "The friends of God and

prophets," she writes, "are found in every nation and tongue, culture and religion, and even among religion's cultured despisers" [*Friends* 220].)

But even as Ondaatje repeatedly invokes the idea of a durable community of saints that extends across space and time he focuses in *The English Patient* on smaller and more transient gatherings. Sikhism's central site, the Golden Temple at Amritsar, survives, and the Sistine Chapel, also a site of pilgrimage in the novel, testifies to the durability of the Catholic Church. But Almásy's desert community is torn apart by war and adultery and the community at San Girolamo by Kirpal's enraged reaction to the dropping of the atomic bomb on an Asian population. The novel distinguishes, then, two overlapping but distinct forms of sanctified community. The first, exemplified by the Catholic sites of Italy and the Golden Temple, is fully institutionalized and explicitly religious, founded in a belief in higher powers and a "supernatural" community that extends its canopy across secularly inscribed boundaries of space and time. The second, exemplified by the two quasi-monastic communities of the novel, is chronologically and structurally postsecular. Like the institutional sites of refuge and worship, the postsecular sites are sponsored by a certain kind of flight from the world and its secular ideologies and structured in accordance with certain ancient religious precepts. But they are not religious communities in the conventional sense: their members are not bound to one another by any vows, or by shared belief in higher powers, or a strong sense of a connection that extends beyond the borders of their local community. The implication of this distinction, both for the communities themselves and for the individuals who inhabit them, becomes clearer when we compare Kirpal's history to Hana's and Almásy's.

In this novel about the effort to found neomonastic communities beyond the reach of national passions, Kirpal's story, like Hana's and Almásy's, has to do with the ancient religious project of choosing and ordering one's devotions, setting one's heart (Lash 27). For Augustine, as Peter Brown notes, the members of the city of God "maintain their identity not by [complete] withdrawal, but by something far more difficult: by maintaining a firm and balanced perspective on the whole range of loves of which men are capable" (325). Like his friends, Kirpal makes a mistake, if a noble one, by choosing to devote himself to "English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son" (217). Moved, it would seem, both by the habit of devotion itself and by the ideological currents of his time, he gets caught up in a

form of secular idealism: a vision of the British Empire as a civilizing agent, a great secular canopy, a secular site of open dwelling. But the bombing of Hiroshima shatters his devotion to the West. As a colonized subject and an Asian, he recoils in horror from what he sees as an act of racially infused barbarism. And he recoils, as well, from the fragile community of healing at the monastery. But he is not destroyed by these losses or driven, as Hana appears to be by a similar experience of visceral disillusionment, into radical isolation. Instead, he deserts his post, returns home, and continues in his healing work, now as a doctor in India rather than a bomb-clearing engineer in Europe. When we last see him, he is running a modest urban medical clinic and raising a family.

Kirpal's resilience, the novel strongly suggests, is a product of his devotion to a traditional community of faith. Trained as a Sikh to see himself as part of a theologically tolerant and cosmopolitan community formed to combat sectarianism and backed by spiritual forces, he lives as it were within the aura of the divine and in company of a formal spiritual family—a *communio sanctorum*—that offers him love and protection. Because he is a Sikh, he is free to participate, up to a point, in the traditions of the foreign community to which he has been delivered. And he does. The "naive Catholic images" he seeks out in the Italian churches are "with him" (278); Mary and the angel are "company," or "parental figures" (280); Mary's face looks "like someone he knew. A sister. Someday a daughter" (80). Kirpal approaches these figures as medieval believers did, by way of "pilgrimages, veneration of relics, Marian devotions, meditations . . . and more" (Kieckhefer 75). And he turns, as medieval Christians did, to icons that heighten his sense of "affective intimacy" (Johnson, "Marian" 392) with the sacred figures from whom he draws support.

This reciprocal relation to a whole array of scriptures, temples, saints, and communities helps Kirpal, as Hana realizes, to "replace loss." "There are those," she reflects, who are, "destroyed by unfairness and those who are not. If she asks him he will say he has had a good life—his brother in jail, his comrades blown up, and he risking himself daily in this war. . . . [W]hatever the trials around him there was always solution and light. . . . For him, there were the various maps of fate, and at Amritsar's temple all faiths and classes were welcome and ate together" (272–73). Kirpal's religious devotion secures him, then, in relation to a vital community of the living and the dead and to the pacific and inclusive values on which that

community is founded. It provides him with a "map" that enables him to make sense of his trials. It protects him from loneliness and despair. And it enables him, by these means, to go on "risking himself daily" in the world, for its healing. We find him, for instance, doing nonviolent battle with the demonic legions: "He was . . . clearing the Elephant and Castle area of a Satan bomb" (190). He can survive the grave disappointment of a misplaced devotion, and the steady violence of the world, because his ultimate devotion is not to secular institutions of any kind, or to any local sacred collectivity, but to the faith within which he dwells, no matter where he is. In the face of secular disappointment, he retreats into the open stronghold of his Sikh faith, which is at once a state of mind, an archipelago of mystically linked sacred places identified with a diversity of faiths, and a living community centered on the Indian subcontinent.

Hana and Almásy often experience the world, as Kirpal does, in religious terms, but because they are deeply marked by secular skepticism and so isolated in their religious experiments they do not see the world steadily and fully in these terms. Hana, like Kirpal, has been lured by secular culture into a political devotion. Trained as a child in Canada to sing the "Marseillaise," she embraces the ideas expressed in this anthem of the modern nation-state and enlists with the other "*enfants*" of the Allied republics for "*la patria*" and its slogans of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Her tour in the hospital tents of the front destroys her faith in these ideas, and after losing her father, her lover, her unborn child, and countless patients, she deserts, refusing to leave the nunnery when her company departs, refusing to allow them to move her single patient. Vowing that she will not "be ordered again" (14) by armies or nations, she proceeds to draw "her own few rules to herself" (14), "taking orders," if you will, of a different, quasi-monastic kind. But now, living simply in the ruined nunnery, she focuses her devotion again in a problematic way, vowing to care only for the English patient, a stranger who reminds her of her father and of Christ and in whose company she feels it possible to relax, perhaps even regress, to "turn away from being an adult" (52).

Ondaatje is full of sympathy for Hana. He endorses her impulse to desert her post in the machinery of the imperium, to draw back from the endless, impersonal butchery of the war, and to reconstruct for herself out of the ruins of religion (the old nunnery) a place of retreat. He validates as well her impulse to recoil from the idea of adulthood enshrined in war culture.

In the hospitals "[r]eason was the only thing that might save them, and there was no reason. . . . People hardened against those around them. . . . Caring was brief. There was a contract only until death" (50–51). By "deserting," Hana is refusing to accept this definition of "adult" behavior. She will not play by the rules of engagement laid down by her culture: accept the definition of life as war, anesthetize herself against pain and pleasure, work until she drops, and forget the dead. She will make a separate peace, find a way back to feeling, work only at a rate that will also enable her to heal herself, and honor her dead father by caring for the English patient. Her life in the nunnery represents a faltering step in the direction of the vision of community, and practices of devotion, exemplified by Kirpal. But Hana's enduring "lack . . . of faith" (271) keeps her from exploring the deeper reaches of the religious life that might enable her, Ondaatje suggests, to recover more fully. Kirpal tries to draw her out of her isolation and disillusionment into another kind of devotion and a more capacious form of dwelling in community, but she will not go. "He knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness" (271). So he "walks her" (271), in words, toward the temple at Amritsar, "guides her into the great gurdwara" (271). But she cannot participate: "her lack . . . of faith" is too strong. In the end, the little community at the nunnery breaks up, its surviving members scatter, and Hana is left alone. Nor can she discovery another community like the one she has lost or build one. More than a decade later, we learn, "she . . . has not found her own company, the ones she wanted" (301). "Company" here resonates with a range of references: not just that "group of friends" Hana has not found, but also the military unit from which she deserted and the company of saints she cannot fully affirm. Hana dwells alone, and this is a matter for regret.

Ondaatje implicitly attributes Hana's painful isolation, then, to the enduring influences of her particular secular history. If she has bestowed her devotion too exclusively, and too narrowly, she has done so, perhaps, both because that is what Westerners are taught to do, in matters of the heart, and because there are no legitimate ideas, collectivities, and institutions, in her experience, to tutor her toward wider forms of devotion. But *The English Patient* also invests Hana's resistance to full return with a certain nobility. One of its sources, the novel reminds us, is the vast history of institutional religious hypocrisy and cruelty. Theodor Adorno articulates

this image of an heroic, ambiguously secular, self-denial at the end of his essay "Reason and Revelation." "I see no other possibility" at the present moment, he writes, "than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant" (142). Religious belief is rejected here, in a perfect example of the ambiguities of a certain postsecularism, in the name of ancient religious values: the celebration of asceticism, the prohibition of images. But what for Adorno constitutes a refusal to abandon real historical gains of consciousness represents, in Ondaatje's work, I think, a noble but misguided act of allegiance to a secularism that mirrors religious fundamentalism in its fierce self-enclosure.

Hana's "new testament" (269) is one expression of this sort of "extreme ascesis." "*From now on*," she writes in a letter after learning of Hiroshima, "*I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public*" (292, emphasis in the original). The contrast between her position and Kirpal's is stark. He has "a haven in the flux of life" (271): his faith, the temple where it is celebrated, and the enduring community of the faithful. She has only her self-checked will to the religious: her devotional imagination, the ruined nunnery, and the passing community it nourishes. These resources give Hana the strength to assist her single patient and make the nunnery garden bloom: she is better off, Ondaatje implies, at the edges of the religious than she would be in the killing grounds of her civilization, where organized religion and secular ideology conspire to make war. But Kirpal, who is sustained not just by fragments of the religious but by an active and inclusive faith, is more fully empowered and blessed: he goes out each day to defuse the bombs or cure the diseases that make all the world a garden of death, and he moves always in the company of a "family" that protects and sustains him. Ondaatje here proposes a paradoxical formula. In our time, he suggests, secular horrors and the thinness of popular Western ontologies and notions of community make secular breakdowns and desertions inevitable; they tend to drive generous-minded people, even those who begin to construct versions of the ancient religious communities of support and care, into isolation. Certain forms of religion, on the other hand, can empower people, by "unworldly" means, for sustained and productive work within society.

Even as he explores the grim possibility that postsecular community building could fail, however, Ondaatje acknowledges other possibilities of

postsecular innovation. In *The English Patient*, both Hana and her beloved patient, Almásy, produce "new testaments." And while Hana's resembles postwar existentialism in its fierce individualism, Almásy's is dramatically postmodern in its celebration of nomadic, loosely collective, and uncentered styles of being. Almásy catches a glimpse of this mode of being early in life, then loses it, only to recover it, after great struggles, on his deathbed. His problem, like Hana's and Kirpal's, has to do with the setting of the heart, the ordering of devotion. The young Almásy is wiser than Hana; he goes as an explorer to the desert where Christian monasticism was born because he has already learned "to hate nations." And he is suspicious of the ideology of romance as well, the grasping and exclusion it entails. Rejecting the world, he and his desert comrades form a "stark order" of men "interested only in things that could not be bought or sold" (143). Yet these interests do not extend, for Almásy or the others, beyond a certain love of the desert itself, and this may help explain the fragility of his devotion and his community.

" 'Even if you are a monk,' " declares a character in *Anil's Ghost*, " 'passion or slaughter will meet you someday' " (103). Passion comes into Almásy's desert refuge in the person of Katharine Clifton, a married woman, and Almásy betrays his principles, his friends, and his community to follow her. In the grip of passion, he "wishes to burn down all social rules, all courtesy" (155). But his deepest betrayal is of his deepest ideal. The desert itself, with its trackless spaces crossed by nomadic peoples, embodies this ideal. " 'What do you hate most?' " Katharine wants to know. " 'Ownership,' " (152) Almásy answers, and yet his need to possess Katharine is so great that it costs her her life. " 'I said she was my *wife*,' " Almásy tells Caravaggio, explaining why the British soldiers who took him for a spy did not rescue his grievously wounded lover after they picked him up (250).

Like Hana, then, Almásy is betrayed not by devotion itself but by the fierce focusing of devotion on a single other. Eventually he, his community, and Katharine are all "disassembled" (158), first by passion and then by the slaughter of the war that sweeps across their world. *The English Patient* suggests, once again, that postsecular devotions may be too spiritually narrow and private to sponsor durable communities. And yet it also honors the spiritual power of postsecular projects and communities. The character we encounter as the English patient is after all caught up in a heroic effort to make sense of what he has done. Looking back on his deathbed, in

a traditional spiritual examination of conscience, he asks some very hard questions. Were he and Katharine "[s]inners in a holy city" (154)? Had he been "her demon lover" (260)? Was he "a curse" (257) on his friends and the people of the desert? All of these questions phrase the issue of accountability in traditional religious terms: Almásy, like Hana, thinks religiously, although he affirms no faith or tradition.

Yet his reflections lead him, in the end, not just to confession and repentance (" 'I said she was my *wife*' "; "there is God . . . , he wanted to acknowledge that now" [250]) but also to the proclamation of a radically unorthodox faith. "What had our relationship been?" he asks at one point: "A betrayal of those around us, or the desire of another life?" (238). Ultimately, he refuses to be constrained by conventional religious codes of virtue or sexual exclusivity. Instead, renouncing once again the grasping love that betrayed him, he tries to imagine the "other life" he and Katharine reached for but could not achieve. Imagining himself to be one with "the nomads of faith" (261) who wander the desert, he declares that "We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (261). If Kirpal depends for his sense of self and purpose on "the great maps of [religious] art that showed judgment, piety and sacrifice" (70), Almásy dreams here of a way without maps, in which the only legitimate "cartography" would be the lines of experience etched on the individual body (261) and where wealth would consist of "a richness of lovers and tribes" (261). This is a vision of a saintly community taken to its limits in a space without walls or borders and a collectivity reciprocally related in the most fluid and polymorphous manner imaginable. What sort of faith would this be? What kind of people might be morally and psychologically prepared to live by its nomadic and nonmonogamous norms? Almásy does not tell us and neither does Ondaatje. What he gives us instead is what we seem to have at this moment in our history: the outline of an antinomian ethic, articulated repeatedly in popular and philosophical culture over the last forty or so years, that has proven extremely difficult to enact. This ethic, as Almásy articulates it, is at once postmodern and postsecular. And yet it shares certain affinities, in its affirmation of cosmopolitan community, its affective inclusiveness, and its claim to transfigurative power with the more orthodox religious ethic celebrated elsewhere in the novel. Almásy is at once Kirpal's other and his brother.

The novel's final episodes sustain this exploration of *communio*. Almásy, lying in his bed after Kirpal has left the nunnery,

> feels a presence in the room. He sees, for a pulse of a moment, a figure at the foot of his bed, against the wall or painted onto it, perhaps, not quite discernable in the darkness of foliage beyond the candlelight. He mutters something, something he had wanted to say, but there is silence and the slight brown figure, which could be just a night shadow, does not move. A poplar. A man with plumes. A swimming figure. And he would not be so lucky, he thinks, to speak to the young sapper again. (298)

The felt presence, positioned where Kirpal last stood, is ambiguously identified. Has Kirpal returned, or is it an angel, or is Kirpal, who fights to disarm the Satan bomb, himself an angel? Or is it just a shadow that Almásy sees? We feel, whatever the case, the beauty of the figure glimpsed by Almásy and catch a final glimpse of Almásy's dream. In the unmapped world he imagines, love would be liberated from the shackles of convention and possessiveness, and erotic communion would take unsanctioned and unpredictable forms. But the moment passes, Almásy dies, and Kirpal becomes a family man. We are left to wonder, then, whether the benignant spiritual promiscuity Kirpal practices—his devotional love for a whole range of saints and souls—is the only survivable form of a *communio sanctorum* or whether Almásy's more carnal and ungoverned community remains an alternative.

And we are left to wonder, as well, whether the communion of saints is merely a figure of speech, a wishful projection of connection across impassable borders of space and time. The penultimate movement of the novel, in which all the members of the living and cosmopolitan community at the monastery retreat to their respective homelands, seems to return us to the cartography of nationalism. But the final movement suggests a last, cautious opening toward alternative conceptions of the real, larger possibilities for communion. Kirpal has returned to India, where he "is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife. He is permanently busy in this city" (299). At the clinic, at home around the table, or in his garden retreat, he is, unlike Hana, in his own "company," full of well-being. He is housed in an intimate community of care and engaged with the larger world, which he heals. Yet he is also mysteriously in touch with Hana, across thousands of miles. The "moments of revelation" that link him to her cannot be explained in

secular terms; they belong to another, religious and premodern, order of being. Strangely, they are also a "limited gift" (300), like so many of the gifts vouchsafed to believers in postsecular fiction: "He cannot discern the company she moves among, her judgment; all he can witness is her character and the lengthening of her dark hair" (300).

Hana, it turns out, is in need. Back in Canada, she moves "in the company that is not her choice. She . . . has not found her own company, the ones she wanted" (301). She has not found, in other words, a community to replace the one she had at San Girolamo. But this does not mean, apparently, that she is entirely exiled from that community or by extension from the larger community of saints. In India, Kirpal has been watching as his daughter struggles with her cutlery at the dinner table. Now, almost simultaneously, Hana and the daughter set something falling. Hana moves and her "shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches [his daughter's] dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles" (302). It seems to me that this final action, at the very end of the novel, represents a sort of test for the reader. Has she or he accepted the novel's many invitations to understand space and time and community against the grain of modern secular models, in religiously inflected terms? If so, then as Rufus Cooke suggests (120), perhaps she will see Kirpal's saving gesture as mysteriously addressed both to his daughter's trouble and to Hana's, as a partial triumph, in other words, over what Hana calls elsewhere "the sadness of geography" (296). If not, the reader may find here only a cruel confirmation of Hana's exclusion from the circle of support Kirpal inhabits. Either reading is warranted, perhaps: this is not the sort of test that assumes a correct answer. I prefer to read the scene as positioning Hana at the far edge of a mystical community that she cannot fully embrace but that somehow helps to sustain her nevertheless. This is after all a postsecular story, the story of a "limited gift."

Anil's Ghost: Dwelling within and Dwelling in Proximity

In *Anil's Ghost*, a novel set in war-torn Sri Lanka, Ondaatje revisits many of the themes developed in *The English Patient*. The novel is set in a nation-

state that has shattered, Ondaatje suggests, into a neomedieval battlefield. The only sites of moral respite in this world are hospitals and monasteries, symbols respectively of humane engagement and traditional religious retreat. The main characters are all subjected to a rigorous education in the ordering of devotion. They embrace modes of being that combine monastic devotions and austerities with dramatic forms of struggle in the world. And many of them share, with Hana, that vexed relation to the religious that fosters a kind of dwelling in proximity to a tradition that cannot be fully affirmed. Indeed, in his portrait of the religious artist Ananda Udugama, Ondaatje suggests that this position is his own. Yet he also suggests its limitations. The makeshift monastic "company" created by the novel's characters is eventually shattered by distrust and violence.

Sri Lanka is a place, the novel tells us, "where Buddhism and its values [meet] the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (300). And indeed it is. In the long civil war between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Hindu Tamil minority, a war in which both sides have invoked the rhetoric of ethnic and religious nationalism and in which both sides have fought with ruthless terror, Buddhism has served simultaneously as a rallying point for communal fury and, among a minority of the population, as an argument for peace and reconciliation. In present-day Sri Lanka, then, as in the world of *The English Patient*, religion serves both to sponsor warfare and to nurture peace.

As Tom LeClair points out in a carefully argued review of the novel, *Anil's Ghost* tells us very little about the actual economic, political, and ideological features of the Sinhalese-Tamil struggle or the smaller, but equally violent, intra-Sinhalese struggles embedded within it. Instead the novel focuses, as does in *The English Patient*, on war's devestating effect on intimate communities, individual minds, and bodies. This restriction of focus, which LeClair and others criticize, reflects, I think, Ondaatje's inclination to see all war and war-making ideologies as fundamentally immoral. In recent times a range of influential religious figures—Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Thich Nhat Hanh—have of course denounced war while at the same time exploring its roots in injustice and advocating nonviolent forms of struggle. Here, as in *The English Patient,* Ondaatje writes, I think, in the spirit of this tradition, and this gives both his representation of the war and the questions of conduct he explores their particular cast. Thus his characters talk to one another "about the war in their country and what each of

them had done during it *and what each would not do*" (285, emphasis mine). And through their actions, as they come to terms with the circumstances of the war and discover unexpected aspects of their own personalities, Ondaatje again endorses a neomedieval devotional practice of worldly retreat and engagement.

The frame of religious reference in *Anil's Ghost* is Buddhist rather than Christian and Sikh. The very question that preoccupies Ondaatje in the novel—how to negotiate apparently conflicting imperatives to care for and retreat from the social world—has preoccupied Buddhists in Sri Lanka for the past century and more. Indeed, the question has troubled Buddhism for two millennia. Thus some ancient schools of Buddhist thought insist that one proceeds to enlightenment by way of resolute acts of renunciation and otherworldliness, while others emphasize the importance of selfless work in and for the world. This tension finds expression in the ancient distinction between the life path of the *arhat*, one who seeks enlightenment through retreat from the world and embraces escape from rebirth when he achieves it, and that of the *bodhisattva*, who follows a similar path toward enlightenment but postpones release from the world and its suffering in order to help others on the path.

This ancient debate flared up in colonial Ceylon in the late nineteenth century. During this period, socially engaged Ceylonese Buddhists, provoked by British colonial occupation and Christianizing efforts, rethought the traditional Sinhalese understanding of the religious path as one of retreat to forest monasteries or temples. They called on monks and priests to become more socially engaged—to help improve the quality of life in concrete ways, through village development schemes, health services, and teaching, and they called on them to become involved as well in political struggle against British colonialism and class oppression. The attempt to shift the direction of religious vocation away from forms of withdrawal and toward forms of social engagement led one influential reformer to invent a new category of religious life, halfway between traditional monasticism and lay practice. Anagarika Dharmapala—a Sinhalese monk who led the reform movement, traveled to America for the Parliament of Religions in 1893, and lectured to William James's psychology class at Harvard—invented the title "*Anagarika*" to "denote an interstitial role . . . to stand between layman and monk as traditionally conceived." The *anagarika* would be a "man without home or family ties who nevertheless lived[s] in the world, not

in the isolation of a monastery" (Gombrich 205–6). His work, Dharmapala stipulated, would involve "far more than the traditional contact of the Buddhist monk with laity, namely giving religious instruction: it [would] involve[] social and political activity" (226–27).

Dharmapala's effort to establish a new category of religious life did not, contemporary scholars of Sri Lankan Buddhism report, catch on. But "approximations to the role, attempts . . . to recapture its spirit, have become a commonplace in modern Sri Lanka" (232). Historically, these attempts have taken two directions. On the one hand, as Stanley Tambiah shows in *Buddhism Betrayed?*, monks and priests, along with lay persons, have become actively and at times violently involved in the turbulent class and nationalist struggles of colonial Ceylon and postcolonial Sri Lanka, participating in strikes, communal riots, revolutionary movements, and even assassinations. On the other, as Joanna Macy demonstrates in *Dharma and Development*, monks and lay believers have mobilized in less divisive efforts to improve the health and material conditions of the poor and to keep communal tensions from producing even more bloodshed. The influential Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, founded in 1958, has mobilized monks and lay believers alike (as well as members of the Hindu and Christian communities) around the ideal of "voluntary selfless giving of one's own labor for the uplift of the poor and the needy" (Gombrich 245). Advocating a "practical this-worldly asceticism of an altruistic rather than acquisitive nature" (Gombrich 245), the Sarvodaya movement offers "a profound vision of involvement in the world, expressed in Buddhist terms" (Gombrich 245). Detachment, in this version of religious vocation, takes the form not of "withdrawal from the world and . . . aloofness from social concerns" (Macy 76) but of a freedom from family responsibilities that makes active engagement possible. One of the goals of the movement is to insure that "the role of the monk will not be modeled on the . . . *arhats* but on the . . . compassionate Bodhisattva who postpones his salvation for the welfare (in this case spiritual and material) of the people" (Gombrich 254).

The Sarvodayans, then, have tried as Anagarika Dharmapala did, to stake out a middle ground between immersion in secular society and withdrawal from it. At the same time, however, they have sought to discourage one aspect of the earlier revival, its encouragement of monastic participation in frequently violent party and communal struggles. Sarvodaya pitches itself, then, not only against secular worldliness but also against two

religious alternatives: the traditional life of withdrawal into firmly enclosed monastic forms of dwelling and the countercommitment of fanatical religious engagement in deadly party and communal struggles.

These developments in Sinhalese Buddhism are barely alluded to in *Anil's Ghost*, yet the ways of life the novel dramatizes and endorses resemble in crucial respects those endorsed by Dharmapala and the Sarvodaya movement. The novel can be read, in other words, as yet another attempt to approximate "the role [and] recapture the spirit" of Sri Lankan worldly monasticism. And it can be read as well as addressing MacIntyre's call for neomedieval monasticism. Ondaatje's protagonists, Anil, Sarath, and Gamini, are not monks or *anagarikas* or members of the Sarvodaya movement itself. (Indeed, *Anil's Ghost* makes no direct mention of the movement.) They are not living in obedience to any formal set of vows. But they have turned away, when we meet them, from serving the imperium and affirming its worldly values, embracing in their stead ascetic styles of being and practices of selfless service to the victims of power. Virtually homeless ("*anagarika*" means "homeless") and unencumbered by family and erotic entanglements, they refuse to take sides in Sri Lanka's civil wars, dedicating themselves instead (as doctors and human rights activists) to working for the relief of suffering, doing "battle with the war" (209). Once again, then, Ondaatje constructs and celebrates a fragile, postsecular, "community of saints" dedicated to healing. Once again, he recommends not only against conventional forms of violent political engagement but against full retreat from "the world." And once again he issues a mixed report on postsecular attempts to craft new modes of being and new forms of spiritual community. His most Westernized characters are ready to sacrifice themselves to others in acts of service. But the power of their secular schooling keeps them from stepping back fully into the traditional communities of faith that support their more religious companions. And their isolation from these communities proves costly.

Retreat, *Anil's Ghost* reminds us, takes secular as well as religious forms. Anil, Sarath, and Gamini, like Ondaatje himself, are children of privilege. As members of Sri Lanka's small colonial and postcolonial middle class (285), they inherit the right of secular withdrawal from the claustrophobia, toil, and strife of Sri Lankan society. And at first they exercise this right. Anil literally withdraws, going first to England and then the United States, where she studies forensic medicine and plans to settle. Sarath chooses an academic career, and escapes, imaginatively, into the work of reconstruct-

ing Sri Lanka's glorious past. And Gamini pursues a medical career in the hope that it will enable him to live life at a leisurely "nineteenth-century pace" (214). In time, however, all three characters are driven and drawn from the security of their worldly retreats. When marriages (Anil's, Sarath's and Gamini's) and love affairs (Anil's and Gamini's) break down, they are pitched into spareness and isolation, only to discover that they are rather comfortable there. And when the war heats up, they are "kidnapped" out of privileged security into ascetic service, only to discover once again that the new life suits them. When, for example, Gamini's wife leaves, he abandons his home and the social world of his class and soon realizes that he misses "little of his past life" (209). "Just sleep and work" are his life now, he reports: "Nothing else. My marriage disappeared. All that ceremony—and then it evaporated in a couple of months" (132). Sarath is in a similar situation. When his wife leaves him, he leaves "the world" (277) to concentrate entirely on his work and finds himself curiously at home in his isolation. Then he is recalled "to the intricacies of the public world" (279) by the war and his care of Anil.

This logic of enabling eviction from secular securities shapes the lives of minor characters as well. Dr. Linus Corea is kidnapped off a golf course by insurgents who need him to care for their wounded. The doctor discovers, to his surprise, that he does not miss his wife or children and that he becomes accustomed to the ascetic life in the jungle. "It's my life," he declares (125), amused at his own transformation.

Anil's Ghost calls attention to the quasi-religious trajectory of these experiences of enabling dispossession by introducing another character, Palipana, who is both driven and drawn from secular prominence into monastic seclusion in a forest monastery. As he grows older, Palipana, we are told, "link[s] himself less and less with the secular world" (81). Eventually he slips "worldly goods and social habits" entirely (83), retires into the forest, and adopts a way of life "in keeping with the . . . monks" (84). Palipana's way, which exemplifies a traditional Buddhist path of full religious retreat, appeals to Anil, Sarath, and Gamini. All of them make pilgrimages to the forest monasteries, are refreshed there, and experience the call of permanent retreat. "There was no wish in her," Anil realizes as she is leaving one monastery, "to step away from this place" (190). And Gamini, visiting the same monastery later on, will find "a great peace" there (217), in the midst of a country at war.

Yet if Ondaatje acknowledges the appeal of religious retreat and its real

refreshments, he also insists, even more emphatically than in *The English Patient*, that it must be combined with unworldly engagement with the world. He argues, in other words, both against those secular radicals who reject all practices of retreat as self-interested and superstitious and against the counterargument that, in a time of darkness, only retreat makes sense. Sarath, Anil, and Gamini all gather strength in sites of refuge and then turn back from them, and from the traditional monasticism they represent, to that interstitial place of neomonastic engagement. Unfamilied, disenchanted with passion, impatient with social life, and unwilling to enlist in any of the warring camps, they dedicate themselves to healing the victims of violence and trying to contain its work. Anil and Sarath risk their lives in an effort to force the competing sides to abandon their most barbarous practices. And Gamini and his fellow medical workers devote themselves to healing the victims of the slaughter. *Anil's Ghost* is dedicated to those who follow a similar path: "I would like to thank the doctors and nurses . . . and members of the human rights and civil rights organizations with whom I met in Sri Lanka and in other parts of the world," Ondaatje writes in his acknowledgments: "This book is for these people and these organizations" (309).

The dramas of turning inscribed in *Anil's Ghost* not only deliver Ondaatje's privileged characters to zones of religiously inflected sacrificial service; they also suggest that religious representations of human motives and needs may be more accurate than secularism acknowledges. We are invited, that is to say, to share the surprise and delight of these characters as they discover the true order of their desires and devotions. Raised to revere the secular goods of romantic love, family, prosperity, and ease, they discover that there are more important things in the world. Thus Gamini, posted to the murderous Northeast as part of his government service, finds his work in its bloody and understaffed clinics deeply rewarding. Indeed, it is "the best place to be" (231): "The doctors who survived that time in the northeast remembered they never worked harder, were never more useful than to those strangers who were healed and who slipped through their hands like grain. None of them returned later into the economically sensible careers of private practice. They would learn everything of value here" (228). Perhaps, *Anil's Ghost* suggests, the practices of saintliness that get formalized in religious traditions and then become subjects for instruction are more intrinsically satisfying than practices tuned to more worldly values. Perhaps

religious discourse only attests to the power of a certain way of being, and this power will still draw and shape subjects who have been formed by secular ideologies that mock or ignore the religious. Read from this perspective, *Anil's Ghost* becomes a profound story of rediscovery, in which culturally obscured but deeply inscribed inclinations and experiences shape the lives of religiously forgetful characters into patterns of redemptive caring.

Or into something like such patterns. For once again, as in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje distinguishes between "churched" and "unchurched" characters, those who dwell within a tradition and those who are to one degree or another estranged. Everyone's life, in *Anil's Ghost*, is extremely difficult, almost unendurable. The rewards of nobility are real and so are its tolls. But Sarath, who has remained a practicing Buddhist through his life, seeking instruction from monks, making retreats, and paying homage to his teachers, seems less afflicted than Anil and Gamini. He does not wear himself out in struggle as Anil and Gamini do, in part because he is not as aggressive, in part because he does not share Anil's Western liberal confidence in the power of social activism to eradicate injustice. But he is ready to participate, when called, in the war against the war. And he is ready to sacrifice his life for Anil's. Gamini and Anil, on the other hand, gain only passing support from their fainter relation to the religious. More dedicated, perhaps, to activism than Sarath, they are dramatically self-destructive and angry people. They remain prey to the ordinary secular modes of retreat from terrific stress: the intoxication of drugs and alcohol and random passion. Their lives, as a result, are full of torment. And Anil, at least, blunders badly in her attempt to be of use. Her confidence in the power of truth to sponsor reform, a staple of the human rights movement she serves, turns out to be dangerously at odds with the situation in Sri Lanka. And her lack of trust in Sarath causes her to break faith in a manner that leads to his death and her hasty flight from Sri Lanka. Through these portraits, then, Ondaatje suggests once again that communities are dangerously weak and that postsecular paths may end well short of any sort of spiritual fulfillment.

An Artist's Place: Postsecular Dwelling in Proximity

If Ondaatje's representations of human rights workers and humanitarians seem designed to suggest that many of them, consciously or not, dwell in

enabling proximity to the religious so, too, do his portraits of the artist. Thus Hana finds, in Kirpal's "small handbook," "a drawing of a saint accompanied by a musician" (291). The musician here is literally in the company of a saint—a part, perhaps, of the *communio sanctorum*. The image suggests a relation of mutual respect and service. But artists are more frequently located, in Ondaatje's fiction, in vexed relation to saints and to saintliness. While they dwell in proximity to the sacred, they are also in touch, in extremely threatening ways, with the demonic. So Buddy Bolden, the tormented New Orleans jazz musician who is the protagonist of *Coming Through Slaughter*, produces a music consisting of "hymns and blues cooked up together." There's something "real strange" about this music, and various characters express their uneasiness with it. "I'm sort of scared," says one, "because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's with His music" (81). Others conjecture that Bolden goes "mad trying to play the devil's music and hymns at the same time" (134). One thinks, in this regard, of the way in which Ondaatje himself tries to honor both religious notions of devotion and forms of carnal desire.

This image of the artist surfaces again, however faintly, in the references to the baroque religious painter Michelangelo Caravaggio in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*. Here we find not only a character named Caravaggio (a thief who paints his way out of prison in the earlier novel) but also references to the historical Caravaggio's work: "There's a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. *David with the Head of Goliath*" (*Patient* 116). Caravaggio was, of course, both a brilliant religious artist and a notorious sensualist and brawler. He used models drawn from the various underworlds he frequented to represent biblical figures, set these figures in scenes of naturalistic coarseness, and framed them in pools of deep shadow. This reference is clearly a self-reference. Ondaatje comes closest to Caravaggio's aesthetic strategy, perhaps, in *Anil's Ghost*, where the major characters emerge out of deep shadow with all their imperfections sharply visible; by contrast, the elevating allusions and luminous visual effects of the *English Patient* recall traditions of medieval and early Renaissance religious art. But his mode of characterization is consistently like Caravaggio's, in that he regularly invests thieves, spies, adulterers, and addicts with the dignity of sacred figures.

Ananda, the artist figure in *Anil's Ghost*, lives like Bolden and Caravaggio in proximity to both sustaining sacred and demonically destructive pow-

ers. But he is less interested in finding ways to blend them than they are. He is a religious artist. As an eye painter—the one who finishes statues of the Buddha by painting the sacred teacher's eyes—he is believed to bring the images he finishes to life. And he works a similar magic when he reconstructs a shattered statue of the Buddha. "The war around him," he thinks, "was to do with demons, specters of retaliation" (304). It is to oppose these demons, then, that he reconstructs the great stone stature of the Buddha on the "killing field" where it stands, enlisting the villagers, as a Sarvodaya leader might, as volunteers in his peacemaking project (301). And it is to oppose them again, to reanimate the religious, that he paints the eyes on the new statue of the Buddha being raised some half-mile away from the shattered and reconstructed original. Finally, it is to keep the demonic from taking charge of his own soul that he does this work, although he no longer possesses anything like a simple faith in the tradition he serves. Having lost his wife in the war, he has lost his faith as well: "as an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith" (304). And yet, "he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon" (304). In this version of the image of a saint accompanied by an artist, then, Ondaatje offers us another explanation of his own practice and position. And he captures that mode of postsecular dwelling in proximity best described, perhaps, by the philosopher Charles Taylor. Many people today, Taylor writes, "identify with a [religious] view but in [a] somewhat tentative, semi-provisional way. . . . This [view] seems to them to come close . . . to saying what seems for them to be the spiritual source they connect their lives with; but they are aware of their own uncertainties, of how far they are from being able to recognize a definitive formulation with ultimate confidence. There is always something tentative in their adhesion" (*Sources* 17). Taylor's respectful treatment of this inclination to keep company with the religious in spite of profound doubts and self-doubts opens a crucial space between two familiar extremes in this postsecular age. For if one inclination today is to resolve inner debates by writing religions off as hopelessly overconfident in their constructions of ultimate reality, another is to write oneself off in the name of religion: to read one's own profound imperfection and confusion as a sign of spiritual deficiency and pretext for surrender to some fierce system. Better to live, Ondaatje suggests here (as Pynchon does in *Vineland*) on the borders of a peacemaking sacred tradition one cannot fully embody or embrace than in the killing fields of secular and religious fanaticisms.

But even as Ondaatje's Ananda dwells at a certain distance from institutional Buddhism, he intervenes to reshape the tradition. By leaving the scars of its shattering showing on the statue of Buddha he rebuilds, he revises the image so that it is "no longer a god" (307) and so that it reveals "a torn look in its great acceptance" (304). These naturalizing gestures are of course consistent with ancient and venerable strands of Buddhism, but by reasserting them Ananda also effects a certain "weakening" and "secularizing" of the popular tradition. (One thinks of DeLillo's revision of classical traditions in his approving description of the damaged statues at the Acropolis in *The Names*.) And Ananda endorses the more worldly strand of Buddhist tradition again in choosing to eschew the "distanced" vision he enjoys from his perch at the summit of the new statue he is bringing to life. He finds the detached view from the summit, which is the Buddha's view, healing. It enables him to come to terms with the death of his wife. But he also experiences its aloofness as "a seduction" (307), an invitation that, if accepted, would call him away from worldly connections and blessings. The power and benignity of these aspects of worldliness is expressed in the last words of the book: still lingering at the top of the ladder, he feels his assistant's "concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world" (307).

In recasting the Buddha's face in human form, and in turning back from the consolations of "Distance" (the title of this last section of the novel) into the world, Ananda honors, as does the lama at the end of one of Ondaatje's favorite novels, *Kim*, those traditions that emphasize the humanity of the Buddha and the obligation of his followers to follow the *bodhisattva* path, renouncing individual salvation until all beings are saved. And he enlists himself in the company of agnostic *anagarikas* that includes Anil, Gamini, and Sarath, his ghostly companion as well as Anil's. But Ondaatje, like Kipling, also invites here a more radical reassessment of tradition, one in which the return to the world is dictated not just by compassion, as it is in the bodhisattva tradition, but also by a sense of its intrinsic beauties and values. Even as he represents characters who choose to dwell in proximity to the great traditions, then, Ondaatje suggests that this practice itself may produce forms of revisioning that partially secularize the sacred.

As I have suggested, Ananda is not the only character in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* who chooses to dwell in proximity to the sacred. Hana situates herself in a similar manner when she makes her home in the ruined nunnery, establishes an order for herself, but avoids any fur-

ther engagement with Christian belief and practice. And Anil and Gamini dwell—less tensely—in proximity to Buddhism. Anil not only finds her way, intuitively, into a mode of life that mirrors certain Buddhist practices of austere engagement; she also feels at home in the forest monasteries and casually wears a Buddhist "*raksha bandhana*," a sacred "thread of protection," around her wrist. She acquired the thread, we are told, "during a friend's pirith ceremnony"; when she pulls on "a rubber glove in the laboratory," the already fading thread appears "even paler . . . as if within ice" (18–19). There is an implicit tension here in the contrast between the rituals of the Buddhist ceremony and those of the laboratory. And there is even a little narrative of secularization in the effect the glove produces on the thread. But Anil seems for the most part to be undisturbed by such tensions: she neither moves to rescue the pale thread of the sacred nor to discard it. In this she resembles Kirpal, a technologically gifted believer, and Sarath, a social scientist and a Buddhist. All of these characters give the lie to the claim that science and the sacred are viscerally irreconcilable. A child of religion and science alike, Anil accommodates aspects of both orders and both give her strength. And while Ondaatje suggests that she might benefit from a more vigorous relation to the religious, he also invites us to appreciate the partial relation she fashions. It contains the promise of further developments in the relation between science and the religious. And it provides Anil with the limited protections of both.

Epilogue
The Dream of Open Dwelling

In *After Heaven*, the eminent sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow distinguishes between two common forms of religious life, dwelling and seeking. Wuthnow's description of traditional religious dwelling is succinct and useful. At its fullest, he argues, dwelling situates the believer under what Peter Berger called a "sacred canopy" (167): within a well-mapped religious cosmos, a well-established and organized religious community, richly symbolic religious structures, and a round of rituals that consecrate time. It requires, in return, that the believer "learn to be at home," obeying the rules and playing the roles assigned by the religious community (146). The satisfactions of such a position include social and spiritual security, personal equanimity, and strength; its social benefits are also significant.

Wuthnow argues that this traditional "spirituality of dwelling" (3), once the dominant form of life in the West as in many other cultures, is becom-

ing less and less viable as postmodern mobility and its inevitable displacements become the norm. In its place, he suggests, postmodernity produces growing numbers of religiously indifferent people, religiously unhoused spiritual seekers, and fundamentalists, whose response to the crisis of dwelling is a desperate effort to shore up the doctrines, scriptures, authorities, and communities that they believe have underwritten it.

Although Wuthnow clearly respects certain traditions of dwelling, he reports its demise with a certain equanimity, suggesting that even its best forms are intellectually obsolete, spiritually confining, and politically dangerous. But history suggests that the great traditions (and the local ones as well) have also sponsored practices of open dwelling that have not closed the door onto otherness, shut the windows on the larger world, or cut off all questioning and innovation within the house of belief. And scholars such as Robert Bellah, Michael Lerner, and Charles Taylor insist that millions of contemporary believers still embrace this more capacious space of open dwelling, one that fosters all sorts of progressive social engagement. Michael Ondaatje shares, I have suggested, these scholars' respect for at least some traditional religious communities and the sacred canopies they erect. Two of his most attractive characters are devoted members of such communities. Kirpal Singh, the technically minded, mine-clearing protagonist of *The English Patient*, is a devout Sikh and an admirer of the Catholic culture of Italy; Sarath Diyasena, the archeologist and human rights investigator of *Anil's Ghost*, is a Buddhist who refuses to get caught up in the religious strife that is tearing his country apart. Kirpal practices a spiritual cosmopolitanism endorsed by Sikh tradition, seeking out and finding his "family" in the Sikh temple at Amritsar, in scenes of biblical figures painted on the walls of Christian churches, and in the unorthodox community that crystallizes briefly at the nunnery. And his faith enables him to work steadily for the amelioration of suffering and the healing of the world. Sarath, while deeply caught up in the reconstruction of his people's Buddhist past, is entirely unwilling to lend his energies to the nationalistic perversion of Buddhism.

If Ondaatje celebrates open dwelling, so too, on occasion, do many of the other novelists discussed in this study. Pynchon's splendid depiction of the evensong service at an Anglican church in war-torn England (*Gravity's* 128–36) may well be the single most powerful celebration this mode of religious life in contemporary fiction. The play of languages, the mingling

of races, the emphasis on the richness of tradition and the passion of the ceremony all testify to the possibilities for good that reside in traditional religious structures and congregations. But DeLillo includes a similar celebration of open dwelling in *The Names*. Owen Brademas remembers that

> [w]hen he was a boy . . . the safe place was church, by a river, among cottonwoods, in the shade of the long afternoons. The choir loft extended across the back wall, the pews were narrow and hard. The minister gestured, sang and orated in the open promotional manner of a civic leader, sweat-stained and pink, a large man with white hair, booming by the river. Light fell across the pews with the mysterious softness of some remembered blessing, some serious happy glimpse of another world. It was a *memory* of light, a memory you could see in the present moment, feel in the warmth on your hands. (172)

This is a perfect invocation of the spirituality of dwelling at its most generous. There is the careful delineation of a beloved sacred place, but the church with its lofts and pews is located within the a field of natural forces with which it resonates—the sound of the river, the light. There is the focus on a leader, but his "booming" voice is also "open," "civic." And there is the strong hint of presence—the presence of the divine in the texture of the light. But the divine figures as light rather than as a lawgiving, curtain-closing lord. Significantly, this vision of open dwelling is, for Owen, an invocation of something lost. Owen's family moves on to a "pentecostal church" where there is "nothing safe" and the building admits no "light" (173). And Owen, appalled, moves on into the familiar postsecular space of spiritual homelessness and seeking. He is last glimpsed living in an empty room in the Far East, where so many seekers in our time have gone to locate a lost sense of the sacred. Elsewhere in DeLillo's fiction, new and radically unorthodox forms of religious experience produce, for brief moments, something like the pleasures of dwelling. James Axton has such an experience at the Acropolis and Jack Gladney on the highway overpass, a place that combines aspects of seeking (the roadway) and dwelling (the nightly gatherings). But there is no further elaboration of the possibilities embodied in Owen's first church.

Morrison, too, honors the appeal of open dwelling within a traditional faith and represents it as a living possibility. Baby Suggs and the Christian community around her work with familiar sites and practices, mixing

and innovating as they go but sustaining continuity with the tradition. In *Paradise* the road girls, under Consolata's tutelage, begin to fashion a new sort of dwelling as they build a spiritual home in the convent, become "calmly themselves," and lose the sense of being "haunted [or] hunted" (266). The rain that falls on this congregation as they dance (283) is like the light that falls on young Owen, a benediction and a manifestation of presence. It is "like lotion on their hands so they [enter] it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads," until they become "holy women" (283). But here, too, as in other narratives of postsecular innovation, the moment of achieved dwelling is brief, the emergent community is swiftly dispersed by outside forces, and its scattered members wind up on the road again. Yet open dwelling also remains a possibility within the organized church: galvanized by his vision of a window or door that opens, perhaps, on other realms, Reverend Misner seems poised, at the end of *Paradise*, to revitalize his more traditional Christian community. Morrison's sweeping survey of the African American Christian tradition from which he emerges suggests that openness is a gift that can be gained and lost and gained again within institutional religions: it is an ongoing project, not a guaranteed state of being or a lost cause. This is Silko's argument too: *Ceremony* dramatizes a struggle to reclaim and open up traditions of Native American dwelling and reminds us, repeatedly, that this effort "isn't easy. It has never been easy" (259).

But Ondaatje's celebration of open dwelling in *The English Patient* seems particularly powerful. It is not only that much of the action is set in a nunnery, an iconic venue of the spirituality of dwelling. Or that Kirpal Singh, a traditional believer, models the life of dwelling in very attractive ways. Ultimately, it is Ondaatje's prose, rich in religious allusion and in sacred imagery, that produces the most powerful effects of dwelling. It works—like the monasteries and chapels he describes, or like DeLillo's light and Morrison's rain, or like the sustained songs and detailed depictions of the natural surround in Momaday's and Silko's work—to locate the reader within a sacred cosmos and *communio sanctorum*. And this effect is less often interrupted in this novel than in others by passages and scenes that shatter the felt sense of dwelling. *Anil's Ghost*, for all its poetic power, reads more like the majority of postsecular texts, in that it conducts the characters and the reader in and out of zones of enchantment. Yet here again Ondaatje introduces the familiar and attractive tropes of open dwelling: religious

buildings like the monastic " 'leaf hall' " (84) that provide shelter but are also open to the elements, sacred images like the reconstructed Buddha that reveal the trace of history in their fashioning, ritual practices that nurture equanimity and compassion, religious teachers uninterested in imposing strict formulas of fidelity on believers, and visceral experiences of sacred powers mediated through nature itself. And here, as we have seen, Ondaatje dramatizes the power of an established faith to sponsor acts of extraordinary generosity in believers and to help those who dwell in their proximity to serve others, fight the battle against war, and retain some balance.

Throughout the whole range of postsecular fiction, then, there are emphatically positive images of open dwelling and the institutions that support it. The fiction presses back, in other words, against its own strong impulse to locate the most vital postsecular possibilities in the innovations occurring outside the pale of the established faiths. And it presses back, as well, against the tendency to reduce all forms of religious dwelling to a choice between stifling routinization of the sacred and the fiercer enclosures of fundamentalism. According to the more nuanced taxonomy of our novelists, dwelling comes in many forms, some profoundly constricting, others dramatically open and complex. In their celebration of these latter forms, postsecular novelists invite readers to view with respect not only a host of postsecular innovators and adventurers but also those less radical innovators who work within familiar forms of traditional religiosity or refuse to abandon completely the traditional faiths they cannot fully affirm. This is, for me, simply one more sign of the sophistication and seriousness of contemporary postsecular fiction.

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